

Reluctant Partner

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Chapter 1

“Mother, let me do that.” Shelly quickly slid out of her car and ran to her mother’s side to take the trash bags from her. “I told you I was coming by.”

“Shelly, I’m not an invalid. I need exercise,” her mother returned in a mild voice.

The heavy bags were turned over without resistance. Shelly carried them out to the side of the curb and stacked them in a row her mother had already started. “What’s all this? Spring cleaning in autumn?”

“Just junk. It’s stuff I put aside in your old room with the excuse I’ll get to it later. Later is here. How long are you staying?”

If Shelly and her mother didn’t have a good relationship she would have thought her mother was trying to get rid of her, but she knew her mother was wondering if she had time to fix a *good* meal for her or just nuke a TV dinner.

“I brought my books to study, if you don’t mind.”

“No, not at all. That means you’ll be staying awhile without fidgeting. I have some left-over lamb stew, day-old bread from the bakery and plenty of fresh coffee to help you study,” she assured her daughter.

“Yum to the food, and the coffee sounds good. You know how to keep me indebted to you, mom.” She leaned over and kissed her mother’s cheek. “Is this all of your trash, or is there more?”

“Two more bags. I made a good dent in cleaning out your old bedroom.”

“Is this your form of entertainment these days?” she asked her mother. Shelly was not going to admit she was worried at her mother’s recent need to go through her belongings. She feared it was like people who were close to dying and couldn’t sleep so they either paced continuously or fussed about everything. Or maybe she just had a lot on her mind.

After dragging two more bags to the curb, Shelly returned to her car to park it better and collect her books. While her mother went to attend to dinner Shelly walked into the spare room that used to be her bedroom. It had become a storeroom. Even she found it easier to just put things in the room until she could get to it.

“Hey, mom,” she raised her voice to be heard in the kitchen, “I can’t remember the last time I saw the bed. I don’t remember it being this small, though.”

Her mother joined her in the room. “Honey, you took your bed with you. That one I had bought just in case you decided to spend the night.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

“You know, you can stay here anytime you want, or if things get too difficult you can move back in. You don’t need to tough it out when you don’t have to.”

“Mom, I know. Thank you. It’s not that things are rough. It’s that I don’t manage my money well. You bail me out and I get right back in debit.”

“Are you in debit more than \$5,000?” her mother asked.

“No, but... I don’t want to talk about my finances. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Do you mind if I study in here? I know you like to watch your old movies and I get too distracted,” Shelly explained.

“Sure, hon. You go right ahead and settle your things. Do you want wine with your meal?”

“Yes. I’ll have a glass. I miss that with my dinners.” The look of affection they exchanged added the unnecessary dialogue that she also missed her mother’s company.

Shelly settled in the chair she couldn’t remember sitting in, and at a small desk she couldn’t remember using. Her mother must have purchased furniture to fill the room she had emptied when she moved.

Determined to get through the long chapter she propped her jaw on one palm and thumbed to the beginning of chapter seven. The other reason she chose to study at her mother’s was that there was nothing to distract her.



“Shelly, hon. Dinners ready,” her mother announced, tapping on the door.

Shelly yawned and looked up from her book. “Well, that’s a relief. I was beginning to tire from rereading that page for the tenth time and still not knowing what I was reading.”

“What’s it on?”

“Database programming. It’s part of a class I need to take to stay up with my job. Dinner smells good.”

Both women sat at the table with a movie playing in the background that neither was interested in.

“So, tell me how your art is coming along,” her mother said after they both took a sip of their wine and hummed their approval.

“Not much lately. As soon as I get my equipment ready it’s just about time to put it away.”

“How long does it take to get things ready?”

“Twenty minutes if everything is in its place, and longer to clean up. The property management people raised the rent for the garage again. I’m going to have to look for another place.”

“I don’t know why you just don’t setup shop in my garage. It’s cleaned out and I’ll get a chance to watch you work. I do like to see how you make scrap into something worthwhile.”

Shelly looked over the rim of her wine glass appraising her mother. They had always gotten along, even through her isolationist adolescence. When she had turned twenty-one she felt it was necessary to move out on her own. She moved four hours away only to return closer to her mother a year later. The move was to establish a social life but for a natural recluse to evolve into a social butterfly never happened. Moving back in with her mother was not an option she thought about until now. Her mother was looking tired and older; not as she imaged her.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked.

“I was just noticing that you look different.”

“It’s called aging. I take naps more often and I don’t garden much anymore,” her mother told her matter-of-factly.

“I can help out with house cleaning and yard work.”

"I've already hired someone to take care of the yard." LeeAnn sipped her wine and carefully set it down. "I haven't been feeling well lately. I know you mean to help, but you just barely have time for your art and that's important to me."

Shelly studied her mother for a longer moment, looking for anything in her face that showed she was ill. "I can pay you rent. You have to charge me rent, mother. You have bills too."

"We can be partners." LeeAnn laughed at her daughter's expression. "Think I'm going to force you to get out on the street and sell your work?"

They had gone over this many times in the past, with Shelly becoming more entrenched with the idea that she didn't want to deal with the public. It took all the fun out of creating for her.

"Alright then. You pay me something, but just enough to appease your conscience. Nothing more. And if I think it's fair, it's a deal," her mother bargained.



That weekend Shelly borrowed a friend and rented a truck to move her art sculptures and supplies into her mother's garage. The sculptures were heavy, requiring a dolly and plenty of grunt work.

"Wait, that's *Spring*. Can you put it out in the backyard?" her mother asked, pointing at a colorful mobile already settled in the garage. "I really do like the way it moves about with the slightest breeze. I want to see it from my room."

"Okay. Ken?"

"With this dolly, it's not so bad to move."

"Just a pain to lift onto the dolly," Shelly muttered as she gripped her gloved hands around the sculpture and turned it around to resettle on the dolly. "Where do you want it, mom?"

"Let me go into my room and I'll tell you."

It took three hours to move all her equipment as well as the sculptures, which included arranging everything in the nearly empty garage. Her wielding materials were rebars and bits of metal, ranging in different sizes, bulk and color that various people supplied her for free or that she bought from a junkyard.

The *Spring* mobile was made up of Ken's contributions and for that reason he was partial to it, and Shelly thought that was also why her mother liked it. Her two-favorite people's contribution to something beautiful.

Ken worked nightshift as a cop and dayshift as a young single male. Shelly and he had at one time been neighbors. While Ken moved to better digs Shelly remained where she was because she hated moving. Their friendship included Ken borrowing Shelly when he needed an official date for police functions. He was not quite ready to come *out* to his fellow cops.

"You two have to stay for lunch. You worked too hard to not eat."

"You don't have to make the offer twice, LeeAnn," Ken said. The freshly baked bagels and cream cheese Ken had brought with him were long gone.

"Ken, what are you going to do for Thanksgiving?" LeeAnn asked.

The two followed her into the house, removing their shoes in the utility room and washing their hands.

Shelly held up a crow bar her sleeve caught on in the utility room. "Working the neighbor's houses, Mother? I told you not to leave evidence around for Ken to see."

“Oh,” Ken took the crowbar. “Did it work for you?”

“It worked perfectly,” her mother said. “I used it for opening a suitcase that rusted closed,” LeeAnn explained to Shelly. “So, what are you up to this Thanksgiving?” she directed at Ken.

“I’m going up to Sacramento. That’s where the family is meeting this year.”

“Not likely a repeat of last year’s meeting,” LeeAnn smiled.

“Colorado,” two voices chorused. They all laughed. Ken’s family gathering experienced a freak snow storm and they were snowed in for days. Not all the members were on that of friendly terms. Ken being the only cop in the family was constantly asked to take sides until he found a place to hide out.

“What are you two going to do?” Ken asked.

“Well, I planned on Shelly baking a turkey here,” LeeAnn said. “I’ll just sit and entertain her while she does her thing to the bird. I want to make sure she can cook for herself.”

“No problem,” Shelly said confidently. “I’ve watched you all these years so I’m sure I have it down pat.” She slapped the table, demonstrating LeeAnn’s tradition of swatting the turkey after she stuffed it. “You tell me the size, and I’ll do the rest.” Mentally she was thinking of Stovetop stuffing for inside the turkey and lots of cranberry sauce in case it all came out too dry.

Ken nodded. “You should take it easy LeeAnn. You’re looking pale these days.”

Shelly looked at her mother concerned.

“Take it easy? Does that mean you’re washing the dishes?” LeeAnn asked him.

“You cooked, we wash,” Shelly sang, covering her uncertainty about her mother.

Chapter 2

Shelly paced the hospital waiting room wondering why ‘just a few minutes’ seemed so much longer.

“Shelly Abbott?”

She turned to face a woman looking confident and busy.

“You can go see her now. We’re finished.”

“Okay, thanks. Will the doctor be by later?”

“He started his rounds about five minutes ago.”

“Thanks.” Shelly picked up her book and headed to her mother’s room. She had arrived when both hospital room occupants were getting their medications and checkups and she felt in the way.

“How are you doing, mom?” she asked softly, fighting back her fear.

“Good. They’re letting me go in a few days, but I have to have someone living with me. Honey, I don’t want to pay all that money for some stranger to live in my house.” Her mother’s voice was upset. “I won’t be bedridden.”

Shelly took cold hands between hers and held them, warming them and giving her all the comfort she could pass over their connection. “I’ll take care of you, mom. I’ll move back in. Heck, if I didn’t know better, I would think the last six months of your cleaning up the house was just for this.” She leaned over to kiss her gently on her forehead.

“Honey, I don’t want you to feel trapped,” her mother whispered.

“Listen, mom. We both can do with some support right now and what better support than each other. Besides, my art stuff is there. We’re partners, remember? I just hope I don’t get you sick on my cooking.”

“I won’t interfere with your social life?”

“Mother, I don’t have one. I’m an obsessed artist that has to work for a living.”

She gently squeezed the frail hand.

“Okay,” her mother told her, letting her eyes slide shut, wearing a smile.

2 months later

“Mother. How are you doing in there?” Shelly hollered at her mother from the kitchen.

“I lost my rubber ducky,” her mother hollered back.

Shelly went into the bathroom to help her mother out of the tub. It had taken both women a month to get used to Shelly seeing her mother naked. But now it was worked out in both their minds to just get what was necessary done. From the shared bathroom, she assisted LeeAnn to her bedroom where the television sat on a bookshelf so she could watch it from either her bed or a chair. Her new bed was a hospital-type. Once her mother was dressed and settled Shelly went back into the kitchen and picked up the tray she was preparing for them both.

The tray was set on the special table on wheels that hospitals used. Shelly swung it so that it was easy for LeeAnn to reach. LeeAnn carefully arranged her plate, utensils and water glass, then looked over at her daughter. “Hon, why are looking at that potato like that?”

“I’m trying to get used to seeing a potato unfried or not buried in cholesterol delight.”

“You know, you don’t cook as bad as you make out,” her mother said.

“You sure your taste buds aren’t dulled with shock at eating my cooking? Actually, the last roommate I had forced me to learn because she was anti-microwave.”

“I thought I would hate all this healthy stuff,” her mother confessed, “But I’m surviving. So, are you going to work some more on your art?”

“I’m going to do some sketches for my next project. I was thinking of working on a series about learning to cook or one on the seasons. Then go to putting together the small-scale models on them. It’ll add to your collection.”

“Well both of those themes sound interesting.” She studied her daughter thoughtfully and ventured. “It’s still hard to sell yourself.”

“I’m not a salesperson, mother. I’m an artist. Why do I have to sell what I make anyway?”

“So, you can make room in the garage for new ones,” her mother said. “And you’re not going to give them away. You promised me. Besides, I’m your partner. I can help you with that part. We’ll have a garage sale. Put it in the local rag,” her mother suggested.

Shelly nodded, not wanting to say no to her mother. She was her biggest fan and they needed the money. The hospital bills were piling up and there wasn’t help from the government unless her mother became destitute, and Shelly didn’t want that to happen.

Her mother deserved to grow old and die in her own house since she worked hard to purchase it and keep up on the maintenance.

“I’ll have my lawyer see that we don’t break any law,” LeeAnn joked.

“You have a lawyer?” Shelly tried to cover her embarrassment.

“Since before you were born. It’s an old family firm. If you ever need to get hold of her, her card and the rest of my stuff is in the lockbox.” LeeAnn put her hand on Shelly’s arm comfortingly. “Would I be scaring you hon, if I told you, I’ve led a fulfilling life and I’m not afraid to die?”

“Yes. But you can say it,” Shelly said through a tight throat and then she started to cry. She crawled up beside her mother and held on to her.



A few days later, LeeAnn was up, moving from her room to the backyard to sit in the sun and watch Shelly’s art move in the breeze. Ken came knocking on the back gate. He brought soup and sheets of printed advertisements of the garage sale for the next weekend.

“Good afternoon, LeeAnn,” he leaned over and kissed her on her forehead. “Are you cold?”

“Hello, Kenny. Just a little. Is that Artie’s flower soup?”

“Yes. And Sue said hi. She misses you. Here. Check these out while I get you settled.” Ken left to get a blanket.

“Leave the soup here. I don’t need silverware when I have plastic I don’t have to wash,” she informed Ken.

The blanket was draped on the couch for easy reach. He was back quickly. “How did you get out here?” he asked as he tucked the blanket around LeeAnn.

“I walked. And don’t tell Shelly. She’ll worry.”

“Heaven forbid that she’ll worry that you’re doing what you shouldn’t be doing – overexerting yourself.”

“I have to exercise. Now hush, and eat your sandwich. You stopped at two places?”

“No. The sandwich is left-over. So, what do you think of the flyers? I put up some at the laundry mat and around the mall. You comfortable there?”

“I’m comfortable. You know you’re good at this. I like this picture of her *Cat On A Wire*.”

He laughed. “You should do her titles. Thanks for the compliment, but I like my night job.”

“Right. Like Shelly likes her day job.”

“It’s good for her. It’s her only opportunity to socialize. If she only did her art work she would turn into a recluse. She’s okay this way,” he reasoned.

“You left off having to take care of her mother.”

“I don’t think she regrets taking care of you, LeeAnn,” he told her gently. “She regrets that you’re going through all this and there isn’t enough time in her day to be with you.”

“Kenny, you’re an angel. I hope you don’t leave Shelly by herself when I’m gone. She’ll be lost. She’s one of those creative types that has no patience for practical things, like nurturing business connections. I don’t mean for it to be a burden for you.”

“LeeAnn, for all that the two of you have done for me, it’s the least I can do. She’s a lot like you, you know? She’s stubborn and private, though the antisocial side is not you at all.”

LeeAnn smiled. “But you can see past all that, and you have charm and maturity and can see a stinker when one is coming. With her, until they get up real close and she smells them, she doesn’t know she’s next to trouble.”

“We can’t take away her freedom to make mistakes, LeeAnn. But I understand. So, you think she’s up to selling face-to-face?” Ken inspected his sandwich before taking a bite. He glanced at LeeAnn as she made her mental review.

“There’s still work to be done on her sales skills,” LeeAnn said after a few moments. “If she can sit on the porch for about four hours without whining too much, we’ll be okay.”

Ken choked out a laugh with his mouth full. “So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to see how she does with this garage sale before we move on to her next lesson. I checked with the city and found out she needs licenses and other such nonsense. That’s all taken care of.” She waved Ken’s unvoiced caution away. “I know she’s got to learn to do for herself, but she’s got a lot on her plate right now. She needs an agent but for now, I told her I would take care of the business end. We’re partners. I take care of one side of the business and she does the other. She really doesn’t have interest in the business end so she’s not going to put much energy into learning it, especially when she’s bothered with problems at work.”

“She’s talented and should get her art shown in a gallery. Her stuff looks better than some of this high school junk they’re selling,” Ken said.

“Her work has improved this last year. She finally has her own style,” LeeAnn said proudly.

“I think she’s ready to be known to the world,” Ken teased.

“Are you going to come over early to move the stuff or about eightish?” LeeAnn asked.

“I’ll have to see how the shift goes. I’ll bring bagels if you prepare the coffee.”

“And get you wound up so you can’t sleep? No way,” she admonished him. “You really need to cut down on the coffee when it’s close to your bedtime.”

“Yes, mom.” He made a face at her.

They could both hear the front door slam.

“Hey, mom, I’m home,” Shelly announced.

“Out here!” two voices chimed.

“Hi, Ken. Mom. I sold the car and for just what you recommended, Ken.” She waved the cashier’s check. It was her mother’s newer model car but it liked the repair shop too well so her mother insisted they sell it.

“That’s what, two bills down and eleven to go,” LeeAnn joked.

“Yes. Two expensive ones.” Shelly plopped in the chair near Ken and picked up one of his flyers. “Nice. Maybe you should do these on a professional basis.”

“Making flyers for garage sales?” Ken snorted in contempt.

“Mother, don’t you think he’s good at this?”

“Yes, I do. There Ken, that’s the both of us. And we have impeccable taste.”

“Oh, before I forget. I have some bad news,” Shelly told her mother.

“Is it going to make my heart break?”

“No, I’m not getting married and moving away,” Shelly said. “I have to take another class. It’ll be two nights a week.”

“And two too many from your art,” her mother complained for her.

“I was thinking of it more in the terms of me leaving you alone.”

“I’m sure I can manage. You gave me a cell phone. We do have neighbors and I have friends that can look in. Don’t worry so much.”

Shelly did worry about her falling while she was gone or maybe something worse. She snapped her fingers. “Cora. I can ask...”

“Honey, let me worry about that. Okay? I’m not helpless,” her mother told her firmly.

To Shelly, she was helpless. Her mother’s illness was taking its toll on both of them, she noted.

Chapter 3

Saturday morning arrived with Ken and some of his night shift co-workers to help move Shelly’s art onto the front grass. They were cops Shelly knew from some of the official law enforcement parties Ken asked her to go to as his date. The four men were impressed with her work and thumped Ken on the back for Shelly’s talent.

Ken stayed too long to get a good days rest for work that night so LeeAnn and Shelly forced him to lie down in Shelly’s room to get some sleep.

“Mother, you’re drooping. Maybe you should go inside and rest. You’ve been working hard at this sale,” Shelly offered.

There had been a lot of people coming by to look but the prices which LeeAnn and Ken insisted stay as they were tagged, had them deciding they didn’t want to buy. Shelly was tempted to give them away for the ridiculous prices some of them offered. However, her mother’s outrage made the potential buyer blush and hurry back to his or her car.

“No. If someone doesn’t help you out here, you’re going to just give them away. Honey, they’re good and these people are just trying to get something nice for a cheap price. Oh, here’s another one. Someone driving a tank like that can afford...”

Shelly turned to see what had her mother’s expression change to astonishment, and then wariness.

A young man about her age was getting out of his Hummer. The vehicle was unusual for their neighborhood. His clothing was pressed and though it appeared to be casual dress for him Shelly thought it looked like he bought his clothing in a name-brand store.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” he greeted politely. He nodded to Shelly and then looked at her mother. His eyes rested on LeeAnn longer and Shelly thought maybe they knew each other. If she didn’t know better, he could be a cousin, however, her mother had told her they didn’t have any relatives she would speak of.

Shelly shook her head at the idea. Her mother’s parents died when Shelly was in her teens and her uncle, someone both her grandparents and her mother talked little of died some years later. He was an Air Force Colonel who died in a plane crash. LeeAnn spoke of him only when she learned he had died in a plane crash. She seemed relieved,

adding that they would not have to worry about any of his four ex-wives bothering them for anything because Jim couldn't have children. To this day, Shelly couldn't figure out what that meant.

"I saw one of your flyers and thought to come by and look. At a quick glance, your work looks interesting."

"If you have any questions, ask me." Shelly was hoping he would not ask her the titles of the pieces. Her mother renamed them and she already forgot what they were. Glancing at her mother, she was tempted to ask her what was going on, but not with the guy in hearing distance. One thing she learned was that if she didn't want something over-heard, don't say it in public. "Mother, do you want to go inside?" she tried again.

"Nope." Her voice was firm and she kept her eyes on the young man. If they knew each other Shelly thought her mother didn't trust him.

"So," the young man came over to them. "Do you have delivery service?"

"Depends where you want it delivered," her mother said quickly.

"I have a place in Santa Monica. I can make space there for this. Can it be outside?"

"Which one?" Shelly asked.

"All of them," he waved his arm at the yard.

"If you pay for half the delivery cost and don't haggle on the price for each piece we'll put it on paper," her mother told him.

Shelly was staring at her work not sure if she was hearing right. She was dimly aware of signing a paper her mother and the buyer prepared and shaking his hand on the deal. His departure went unnoticed by her. She was in shock.

"Hon, before you call a truck rental place, I want you to make sure the check clears."

"What?" Shelly shook her head as if just coming out of a fog.

"The bank is still open. Get on over there and cash his check. It's the same bank as our joint account so there shouldn't be any delays in it crediting to that account. Then go rent a truck and I'll wake Ken when you're ready. Shelly, are you listening?"

"Mom, it doesn't matter if he's with the same bank. The bank will hold this because of the amount."

"Trust me on this. They won't hold it. Now, help me into the house. I've got some calls to make."

"What calls?"

"Go to the bank and rent the truck — and we need signs on those things saying they've been sold."



At the bank the teller seemed to be unconcerned with the amount being put in their joint account, twenty thousand for seven sculptures.

"When will I see this posted to our account?" Shelly asked.

"Memo posting right now," the clerk told her smiling.

"Are you sure he has the money?"

The woman looked at her surprised and then chuckled. "Lady, believe me. This is like pennies to him." She had glanced at his memo on the check which said the money was for art work. "You must be good," she added.

“I do good sculptures,” Shelly told her, trying not to sound indignant if she was inferring anything else.

Shelly stopped at the U-hall rental and from her having to move the pieces from her previous storage to her mother’s garage, knew the size truck she needed. She added padding and a dolly, and got a receipt, as her mother insisted she do. Since her mother had worked so hard on this sale Shelly was going to make sure she did it exactly as she directed.

Shelly called her mother to see how she was doing with the helpers.

“I woke Ken and Mutt showed up,” her mother informed her.

“Mother, I wish you wouldn’t call him that.”

“I’m sure he’s heard worse, and if he doesn’t like it, how come he keeps showing up without an invitation?” her mother returned. *“Come and pick them up. Did you get the truck?”*

“Yes. The U-hall place on the corner of 4th and Market. When can they do it?”

“Now. Strike the iron while it’s hot. Ken is wiring himself up on coffee right now.”

“Okay. I’ll...”

“Wait a minute!” her mother said at her before she hung up.

“Hey gal,” Ken said. *“Congratulations. You certainly lucked out on this one. He’s one of the Hayes... Oh, okay, LeeAnn. She said get your butt over here.”*

“I’m on my way,” Shelly laughed. A part of her was beginning to get giddy with the sale and then another part got practical and remembered she needed to see her mother’s accountant... or actually hers too. Since she was now handling her mother’s paperwork her mother’s financial adviser helped line all of LeeAnn’s financial ducks in a row, and told both of them what needed to be done in order for the mounting medical bills to be paid.

On the ride back to her mother’s house, or their house, Shelly tried to keep her speed within legal limits. No longer was she numb as the adrenalin kicked in.

“Hey,” Shelly greeted as the guys hopped into her truck to be driven to the U-Haul lot. “Who’s going to watch mom?”

“She’s asleep, content that her artist daughter has made a killing on her first show,” Ken reassured her. “I want to see this character that bought the whole collection.”

“Like a Hayes cares what you think of him,” Matt said. “You won’t even rate notice. He must be slumming to come out here to buy yard sale...”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Shelly demanded before he finished. “If you’re going to be walking around with your head up your butt, go home.”

“Do you want help or not?” he demanded. “I wasn’t expecting to get roped into delivering stuff,” he said huffily.

“You weren’t roped into it. You told LeeAnn you would help deliver the sculptures.” Ken shook his head. “If you’re in a rotten mood, you aren’t doing us a favor by coming along.”

“I’ll help,” Matt said. “I want to see where this guy lives.”

Shelly would have looked over at Ken to see what he was thinking but thought better to keep her eyes on the signal light. They may both burst out laughing at Matt’s mood swings which were as touchy as a woman PMSing.

“It’s not like you know people like him,” Matt continued. “I’ve been around them. They’re takers and they think they’re above the law ordinary people follow.”

“They are above the common law,” Shelly said. “They can afford the better lawyers and can pay the large fines instead of going to jail. It’s been that way for ages in all countries. So, what’s the big deal? You sound like you just found that out and can’t accept it.” Shelly felt irritated with Matt and was tempted to tell him she didn’t want his help.

“Everyone should be judged the same way,” he stated doggedly.

“Oh, bull,” Shelly said. “Police give each other breaks and there are other perks I’m sure we civilians haven’t heard of. Let it go, Matt. The guy’s nice and he’s my customer. If you’re going to be rude or walk around like you have a chip on your shoulder, don’t come. Ken and I can move the stuff.”

“I’m just stating a fact,” Matt told her defensively.

Their arrival at the truck rental place was a relief for Shelly. Matt and Ken probably squared off in the truck and she regretted Ken having to listen to Matt.

They pulled up into LeeAnn’s driveway and moved the sculptures onto the ramp in the back of the truck. Shelly wrapped the sculptures for transportation and made sure they were secured in the back.

“I didn’t think of it, but if any of these breaks I’ll have to give him his money back,” she informed Ken, as another sculpture jiggled.

“Follow us in your car. If anything is broken, you can either fix it there or assure him you’ll fix it later. We’ll be your witnesses. That would be great customer relations, a gesture of good faith,” Ken said.

“Well, I guess I could. Just as long as you guys don’t leave me alone with him,” she said.

“Think he’ll kidnap you and hold you for ransom until you do seven more?” Ken teased.

“No. But my mother taught me not to go to strangers’ houses alone.”

Turning her attention back to the last piece to move she watched as the two maneuvered it onto the truck’s tail gate lift.

Before they left, Shelly checked on her mother who appeared to be napping.

The truck led the way onto the freeway and Shelly followed, nervously tapping her fingers on the steering wheel regardless of what rhythm was playing on the radio.

The address in Santa Monica was through a gated area where mansions with long front yards and probably equally long backyards were separated from their neighbors by high fences and beautiful old trees.

“This is my type of neighborhood. None of that living on a farm with clubs more than a few minutes away,” Matt told the two as they walked to the front door together. His eyes never stopped looking at the various houses. If he wasn’t a cop, Shelly would have worried he was casing the homes.

A butler opened the door, or Shelly assumed he was a butler. Who else would be opening the front door of a wealthy socialite?

“You can deliver the items through the back way,” he directed Ken. “That is where Mr. Hayes has decided they shall be displayed.”

“Okay. Does it bother Mr. Hayes for us to leave the truck here or...”

“It would be easier on you to drive the truck up the road to your left. There is also an exit out the back way.” He glanced at the small beat up Toyota truck near the fountain. It was the safest place Shelly thought to park so she would not be in the way of the truck when it pulled out, and if someone else needed to use the driveway.

“I’ll move my vehicle too,” she quickly offered. She didn’t get a reaction but he gave a polite nod to them all and closed the front door.

“Imagine that, we can’t even get in the front door,” Matt said cynically, as he climbed back into the truck.

“I’m not carrying that stuff up those stairs and through his house just so you can get a look at the inside of his house,” Ken said.

Behind the mansion were gardens that she thought only people in garden books had. Anthony Hayes, the new owner of her work, was standing with two men in the backyard. He waved at them, with one of the other men quickly stepping forward and guiding the truck to where they wanted it parked.

“Ah, the artist. Want to see where we’ve thought to place them? First, let’s unpack them. Jose and Carlos will help you. They have experience in unloading art.”

The first sculpture was unwrapped undamaged. It was set on a cement stand. The late afternoon sun sent shimmering reflections off one of the pieces that wobbled from the move. Shelly took a moment to admire it and admitted it was worth what her mother and Ken had priced it at.

“This other one will be good for the orchard. Scare off some of the birds without detracting from the scenery,” Jose spoke.

While the four men did the work, Shelly was shown onto the enclosed porch where, still in view of the four men, Anthony showed her where he wanted one of her moving sculptures.

“But this one is nice,” Shelly told him. She touched the outstretched palm of the statue that held a freshly cut flower.

“Yes. It is. But when I have parties here it’s rather disgusting what a party-goer leaves in his palm. Your sculpture has nothing flat to rest something on and it still looks nice. No?”

“Home decorating isn’t something I put much thought to,” she admitted.

For a moment, his smile reminded her of someone, but then he turned away.

“Excuse me a moment. I heard my cell ring. I left it in the house.”

He disappeared into the dark interior. Shelly stepped down the stairs and headed back to the truck to see how the guys were doing. There were two pieces left in the truck. One was leaning sideways. Climbing into the back she hurried to it, hoping it had not been damaged.

“I was going to call you to have a look at it. I think it got knocked a bit with the last one we were moving,” Ken informed her.

“Well, let’s move it out and I’ll take a closer look,” Shelly said.

Carefully, she unwrapped it and was dismayed that the most fragile of them didn’t fare well.

“Not good?” Anthony asked behind her.

“I can repair it or you can have your money back for this piece,” Shelly informed him.

“No. I bought seven. That’s good luck. What do you need to repair it with?”

“A torch. I’m not sure when I can get up here. How about a tentative Sunday of next week?”

“I’m having a party this Wednesday. I want them to be ready. This is just perfect to have for the party. It’s going to be the last outdoor bash before it gets too chilly.”

Mentally, Shelly went through her schedule. Monday, she had a class test due, Tuesday evening she was taking her mother to her physical therapist’s appointment. She worked during the day time and she had already taken too many days off for taking her mother to appointments or staying with her when she needed someone at her bedside. That left tomorrow, Sunday. Sunday was the one day she set aside for working on her art. It was nice because her mother liked to sit wrapped in her blanket and watch, usually falling asleep.

“How about tomorrow night, Sunday? What time would be okay?”

“Anytime. Just call the house and let my secretary know you’re coming and what you’ll need.” He pulled out a card and handed it to her. On it was his name, cell number and business number. “The business number will get my secretary.”

Anthony left them near Shelly’s truck.

Of course, he would have a secretary, she thought. Turning to Ken she noticed Matt was missing. “Where’s Matt?”

“Sulking in the truck. He wanted to use the restroom in the house and didn’t like Jose’s reply to use the restroom in the guest house,” Ken said in an undertone.

“He wasn’t rude to them, was he?” By Ken’s expression he was. “Why did LeeAnn ask him? He gets in a funk if he has to do something, like clean up after himself,” Shelly asked impatiently.

“Sometimes I think she does it to irritate him. He hasn’t been inviting himself over as much since she’s been sick. His drop in today was a surprise. I don’t think he was expecting me to be here,” Ken laughed.

“He gives me the creeps when he does that,” Shelly admitted.

On the ride back, Shelly was mentally shifting her Sunday around to fit in fixing the sculpture. Her excitement was tinged with reality; in that one customer that may be eccentric was not enough for her to give up job security, a medical plan, and her retirement benefits. Watching her mother struggle with her own medical costs in a system that really never was intended to work for those that needed it, made her realize that she needed to start making sure she had enough money and insurance to take care of herself should she become ill.



“Shelly,” her mother called from her room.

“Hi.” Shelly popped her head in her mother’s room. “You’re not sleeping well?” she asked concerned.

“I slept fine. I was listening for you. So, what was his place like?”

“Too big for someone his age. A huge house sits in a huge yard. He has good taste or his decorator does. He put the sculptures in really nice places. Five of them are in his backyard and two of them in his enclosed patio. I have to go back tomorrow night and weld a piece back on.”

“I want to go,” her mother told her firmly.

Shelly looked at her surprised.

"I'm going with you," her mother reframed.

"Mother, you can hardly move around. He didn't invite me in. The piece is in his yard and it will be dark. Damn!" she snapped her fingers annoyed. "I'll need to bring my light. I can use the one in my truck. It uses the battery power," she planned.

"I can sit in the truck. But you're not going there without someone to watch your back and it's going to be me."

"Have you met him before?" Shelly asked suspiciously.

"No. That was the first time I've ever seen him. But it doesn't mean I haven't heard about that family."

"You and Matt know a lot about this family, only with Matt, I think he has a hot poker up his butt about them. I'm not going anywhere with him again."

"Don't worry about him. He's just a nosey nose and will one day get the door slammed in his face for poking in other folk's business."

"Why does he come here, mother?"

"You'll have to ask him," she said.

"No way. Then I have to listen to his nasty remarks."

"Well, then, you'll never know the answer. You have to learn to ask questions on matters that concern you." Her mother tweaked her cheek. "You have to face what you fear so that you're no longer their prisoner."

"Fear of asking questions?" Shelly laughed. "I'm used to people asking me questions and I give answers."

"Challenges, like learning new mental and physical skills keep your brain agile and fluid. You need to put yourself into new situations and..."

"Just flow with the moment," she anticipated her mother's comment. "Mom, you're doing your Zen thing on me."

"It's for your own good," LeeAnn told her with a smile.

Shelly looked at her mother's hand that she was holding, recalling the activities her mother dragged her along just so that her shy daughter didn't become a total isolationist. Yoga, knitting, badminton when her mother was younger, and other interests that struck her mother's fancy. It didn't matter that it was only for a month that her mother was interested in the activity.

"How old was I when we took that knitting class?" Shelly asked.

"Fifteen. You turned sixteen the last day of the class and that knitted cap was awful," LeeAnn remembered.

"The colors were great. I kept losing track of the stitches," Shelly admitted. "I was doing too much thinking. Granddad and grandma died during that time. They were coming back from Vegas after having a good time. Grandma said she had a silver dollar for me. I remember they called us before they left."

They were quiet for a few moments. "I saved that cap until the rats chewed most of it to bits. Even then I knew your interest in art was going to be tactile and heavy," LeeAnn said.

Shelly laughed with her mother. At that age, she was into picking up logs and with wood chisel and mallet, chipped away at whatever appeared in her mind. That was her totem phase which included burning what she carved in the fireplace. She had her own brand of rituals and spiritual beliefs then.

"I'm going," LeeAnn said as she watched her daughters face.

“What if you need to go to the restroom?”

“I’ll ask to use their toilet facilities, the same as you. You’re not embarrassed about asking them to use a restroom should you need it, are you?”

“Mother, in a picture I watched, the hired help doesn’t use the wash facilities on the premises.”

“What do you plan on doing if you have to go?”

“Wait until I leave and find a gas station.”

“Shelly! Those places are filthy and dangerous. I’m going. And that’s final.”

“All right mother. Don’t get your adrenalin pumping when you need to be winding down for sleep.”

Chapter 4

That night Shelly tossed and turned, wondering how she was going to get out of taking her mother, though she was not happy with the prospect of going to Anthony’s place alone.

Sunday, Shelly spent fixing things around the house that seemed to not want to work. She also cleaned and did other household chores that kept her from her art work. For some reason, she could not find the time to get into the garage. When she finally found the time it was one hour before she was to be in Santa Monica. Her mother happily reminded her, that she was coming along.

“Mom, I don’t know what you think you’re going to see. It’ll be dark.” Shelly picked up the phone and called Anthony’s secretary to confirm her time. A woman, whose voice Shelly found rude picked up the phone. She merely listened and hung up.

“Well, I know that wasn’t the secretary. If she were mine, I would fire her.”

Shelly had borrowed a friend’s truck from the salvage yard where she found a fan of her art who supplied her with metal for a good price and occasionally swapped her computer knowledge for scraps. What made the truck ideal was it could carry what she needed for her welder and the gas tank was situated so if they were hit in a traffic accident she would not worry about her mother and her going up in a ball of flames.

The guard at the gated community recognized her, which impressed Shelly who thought they would be mindless minimum wage earners, standing guard over people that spent more money in one day than what they would see in a lifetime.

Her mother appeared alert but quiet.

Without being told, Shelly pulled around into the back where she found the area was well lit. She had not realized there were lamps about the garden. The glare from the lights had her pulling on her cap.

“It would take me years to weed this place,” her mother remarked.

“Mother, you can buy a weed wacker with a seat if you owned this place.”

“They don’t make weed wackers with seats,” her mother admonished. “If they did I would have one.”

“I doubt it. You enjoy the dirt too much,” Shelly said. “You all right?”

“Of course. Watch out, a sour puss is heading this way,” her mother observed softly.

A woman that looked like she spent a lot of time in salons getting groomed approached them. Her facial expression didn't create any facial movement which could be from too many Botox treatments, though Shelly suspected it was a definite class wall separating them. It was all in the attitude.

"Don't let her intimidate you," her mother whispered.

Shelly pulled her cap further down, a way of protecting her from the glare she expected from the woman.

The woman stopped in front of Shelly, inspecting her as though she were something new.

"So, you're the artist my son likes," the woman stated haughty.

Shelly waited, hiding her surprise. Why would Anthony's mother come out to see an artist her son bought twenty thousand dollars' worth of work from, when according to the bank teller the amount was a paltry amount of money Mr. Hayes wouldn't even notice? Shelly's heart beat a little faster, thinking of the impact the added income had on her life.

"He thinks you have talent. Enough to have your work in a show," she continued in a bored monotone. Shelly waited for the disdainful sniff followed by something else that was depreciative. Until now, she had thought people acted like this only in movies; that people really were like this was amusing. Shelly made an effort not to look at her mother and laugh.

Shelly glanced at the sculpture she was there to fix, wondering how she could get to work. As amusing as Anthony's mother was, she needed to get her own mother home. She brought her attention back to the woman who stood in her way. She wore an odd expression, and it was as if she was asking Shelly something. However, unless she just came out and asked Shelly was not going to ask her what she was fishing for. Suddenly it dawned on her. Maybe she thought she and her son were lovers. Shelly decided she was not even going to dignify that thought with a comment, if that was the case.

"It's nice to have my work appreciated. Would you mind if I get to work?"

"Do finish your work." And with that, the woman left not even looking in the truck at her passenger. Maybe she hadn't realized there was someone there.

Shelly flashed her light along the mobile, verifying what she was going to be doing. Equipment was muscled out of the truck bed and set up. A light was clamped on the truck's side mirror, shining on the spot she wanted to fix. After firing the piece back on she laid the other spare pieces she had in the truck out and then formed a pattern that may help the piece against another bump.

"Frankly, I like it better this way," Jose spoke.

Shelly jumped. "Jesushchrist!" Shelly held the welding torch down and flipped the mask up. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Shelly, you alright?" LeeAnn called.

Jose looked surprised. He peered in the truck cab and nodded to her.

"Mother, this is Jose. He helped set up the art for Mr. Hayes. Jose this is my mother, Mrs. Abbott."

"Mrs. Abbott, how do you do? Your daughter is a very good artist. We were wondering why she hasn't shown around here."

"She's tried, but was told her work isn't in style," her mother answered. "They don't know good art when they see it."

Jose smiled. "It's a very political and competitive field," he admitted. "A mentor or sponsor helps and then you have to be able to put out at a manic pace to cash in while the interest is there."

Shelly shook her head. "Then I'll never make it. I create to feed *my* muse."

Jose gave her a polite smile. Shelly and her mother thought he was chalking them up to naïve women who would change their tune if the chance to make it big came her way. Shelly however, knew otherwise. That was why she had a full-time job. She didn't want outside pressure defining her need to produce art work.

"Well, then. I'll just leave it as it is." Shelly began to put her equipment away, with Jose helping her lift the tank up and secure it.

"It's frailty is what makes it so precious out here," Jose explained. "I came to offer you some refreshments or the use of the powder room if you should need it." He pointed to another building. "It's the guest house. It's empty right now and clean."

"Mother, do you want to come with me?"

LeeAnn nodded. Shelly was wondering if her mother would be able to walk the distance. Shelly started to help her mother out of the cab when Jose offered. Embarrassed Shelly realized it was probably one of the social things where men helped women. She really had to get out more.

Shelly was on the other side of her mother as the three made their way to the guest house. Her mother used the facilities first while Shelly studied the guest house. "It's not what I would expect of a guest house," Shelly told Jose.

"It's opened up during garden parties and is used mostly for the younger set to gather."

"I bet the bedroom doors are locked," Shelly said.

LeeAnn came out at that time. "Jose, you might want to clean out the trash."

Jose looked surprised.

"A syringe is in the trash."

Jose nodded, not revealing what he thought of LeeAnn's finding. "Thank you. I'll take care of that."

"I love watching my daughter work," LeeAnn told Jose, who sat with her on one of the soft cushions. "Have you watched many artists work, Jose?" LeeAnn asked.

"My parents. Out of three kids, I'm the only one not working as an artist. I've gone from the landscaping businesses to tending mansions, and now I also select art to blend in with the landscape."

"Do you enjoy that?"

"What's not to like? I get invited to very nice places with other people paying my expenses."

"There's a downside, surely," LeeAnn shrewdly guessed.

"I've been married three times."

LeeAnn nodded with understanding. "My late husband was always on the road." LeeAnn looked up as Shelly joined them. "Hello dear. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes."

They said their byes to Jose at the truck and Shelly headed back to the junkyard where she would exchange the junkyard truck for her smaller truck. LeeAnn was holding up well for all the travel. Shelly guessed it was the napping that helped.

Chapter 5

Four days later when Shelly returned home from work, her mother was wheezing. She spent the night sleeping next to her mother, not wanting to leave her alone. The next day, regardless of her mother's objections, she made an appointment for her. It was flu season and her mother was not strong enough for a flu shot. She was sent home with another oxygen tank.

The next weekend a knock on their door brought an irritated Shelly to the door. Anthony was standing there.

"Uh, hi. Is everything okay?" she asked, taken aback.

"Someone at the party thought they were Don Quixote and attacked one of the trees and hit your sculpture instead. I was in the neighborhood and thought to see if you were home. Do you make house calls?" he asked hopefully.

"Come in," Shelly opened the screen door, thinking he was working on something more than a client relationship. She needed to inform this guy that she was a lesbian and not interested in a bi-sexual relationship and even if she were, she would not date a customer ...especially a well-paying customer.

LeeAnn was sleeping with her oxygen attached and Shelly didn't think their voices would disturb her.

"So," she gestured to the couch. "You want me to come by and repair it. This isn't going to be a regular thing, is it?"

"I hope not. But it's handy to know the artist."

"Listen, Anthony. I'm not interested in dating you or going out with you."

"You're a lesbian. I know. I like you. You're the first artist I've had a chance to meet before you make it big. Once an artist makes it, she changes."

"Yeah, Jose said something like that to my mother," Shelly mentioned.

"My Jose?" Anthony asked surprised.

"Yes. Sunday when I returned to your place, my mother was with me. Jose was nice enough to offer us the use of the guest powder room and to help my mother walk over there."

"He's in Canada right now. He's looking for some art work for mother's garden." Anthony smiled at Shelly and again she had that feeling that the smile was familiar. "My mother liked one of your pieces enough to wear her glasses when looking it over. She tried to get me to give it to her. If she likes your work I know it's good. She has an eye for art, and if you were male, the artist."

"You don't seem to be bothered by that," Shelly remarked.

"She's single and can take care of herself. I long ago stopped worrying about her and the men she goes out with."

"She dates?" Shelly asked surprised.

"Yes. When I was younger I was particular who was going to be my 'daddy' replacement. Haven't you been in the same predicament?"

"No. I never thought of that. My mother was too busy working two jobs. One taking care of me and the other to pay the bills. My father left us with a mortgage and bills.

Anthony looked surprised.

"He died in a car accident. Seven car pileup. He went out big."

“You don’t sound all that shaken up,” he said.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t remember him all that much. He was a workaholic. Just what a small business owner needs to be. He didn’t want mother to work and insisted on doing it all himself which took him away a lot. Mother ended up selling everything including the house to settle his debts. What she has now is through her own efforts.” Shelly was proud of her mother’s accomplishments and wanted to let Anthony know.

“You thought he was having an affair,” Anthony stated.

Shelly was surprised at his frankness, but then, it was not his father. “I don’t know. I was too young to care and mother never spoke of it and today it doesn’t make any difference.”

“Would you like to come to a party next month? You can see what people that have the money to buy your work are like; though, a party isn’t the place to make snap judgments about people.”

“No, thanks.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one, I don’t want to go out and buy clothes that I’ll wear only one time, and two, I don’t do parties or for that matter bars. My time is precious to me.”

“Come on. These are people who your art could be marketed to,” he coaxed.

“Anthony, I don’t have time for marketing. I have other responsibilities, which I don’t mind doing,” she added smoothly, thinking she didn’t ever want her mother to think she felt she was only an obligation, “and part of that is giving myself time to do my art. I don’t have the time to go to a party and watch people knock themselves out on drugs.”

“There you go. Another reason you should accept my offer. If anyone does drugs at my party, they do it out of sight. Undercover officers sometimes come under the guise of escorts for my guests. You need the exposure to this type of party before you become famous.”

“You keep saying that. I don’t want to be dependent on my art to keep me alive. I doubt I’ll be attracting any big-time agents or their art galleries,” she argued.

“You’re talking yourself into believing your art isn’t worth the effort to sell it. Think about coming to the party. Meanwhile, will you come by when you have a chance and fix the sculpture? I’ll pay what you ask for.”

Shelly blinked a few times, thinking of this. This was something she had not thought of when she moved into the business of making money on her work. She would have to speak with Margaret Stuart, her mother’s financial adviser – and hers, she reminded herself.

“Is there urgency to the repair?”

“Just as long as it’s done before next month.”

“Your secretary, she...”

“He,” Anthony corrected.

“Oh. I thought that was a woman that answered...”

“My sister probably. My mother and her travel in pairs. Like two nuns, huh?” he smiled.

“Okay then. Let me find out what my schedule is. Just what is broken?”

“My guest and a broom handle got entangled in the piece with the bright blue circles.”

“Moon tides,” she nodded.

“Moon?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I just come out with whatever strikes me when I look at the work. Mother thinks I should let her name them.”

“A title is important. Maybe she can go through them and name them and I’ll know what to call them.”

“Don’t have to. She has an album of my work with her titles beneath them.” She rose and pulled out the thick album from her mother’s overflowing bookshelf. Her mother had downsized her many bookcases and books to one bookcase stuffed with books she didn’t want to part with.

He eagerly took the album and began to look through the pictures, taking his time. “I like these titles. Do you have something I can write on?”

Shelly gave him a pad and pen. His handwriting was not legible. She was glad she wouldn’t have to translate.

As Shelly was showing him out, Ken was arriving. He was stopping over before he went to work to drop off some CDs he made for LeeAnn. His side arm that normally was concealed was now showing and his cleaner dressed appearance caught Anthony by surprise. As one left the other entered the house.

“What’s he doing here?” Ken asked when she shut the door.

“One of his guests mistook one of my sculptures for a windmill. What’s this?”

“Your mother asked that I burn some CDs with chants and hypnosis for relaxation. When she has breathing problems, calming herself down helps.”

They both went into the room and found LeeAnn sound asleep, propped up so she could breathe easier. The oxygen tube was in place and she looked comfortable. Shelly turned off the TV and Ken put the CDs on so they played softly in the background. They both quietly left.

“What do you think of Anthony, Ken?”

“He’s bi and not interested in you. I’m curious why he’s here.”

“Bi as in bi-sexual?”

“Yes. I know those feelings...like gay-dar there’s bi-dar.”

Shelly muffled her laughter so as not to wake her mother. “Well, he’s funnier than you. He says he wants to be friends because he’s never known an artist before they hit the road to drug life.”

“That’s not going to happen with you. We’re family. You, me, and LeeAnn. We take care of each other. Right?” Ken asked her solemnly.

“Right,” Shelly agreed and they pressed their foreheads together so that Ken could cross his eyes causing Shelly to cross hers.

“He asked me to one of his parties. Says I should get used to being around the people I’m going to be selling to so I’m prepared when I get famous.”

“Well, he says all the right things. But he’s not sniffing after you. I don’t pick up those vibes.”

“Neither do I but just to be sure, I told him I wasn’t interested. He also told me he knows I’m a lesbian.”

“I think you should take him up on his offer.”

“I don’t do parties.”

“But he’s right about the exposure. Do you want me to be your date?”

“Now that’s an offer I wouldn’t mind taking up.”

Ken nodded. “Since you’re always helping me it’s the least I can do for you.” He looked at her seriously. “You’re going to have to go shopping. These people only wear name brands and they do notice if you’re not.”

“Why should I care?”

“Because these are your potential customers. Anthony is right. You can use this opportunity to do exactly what he presented it as – an opportunity to see what your customers are interested in. You incorporate in your work things you see about you. This will be like doing research.”

“Have you been to any of these parties?”

“Yes, and not always when I’m on duty to bust them.”

“Okay. I’ll find out the exact date and time from his secretary and I’ll let you know.”

“Good. See you later.”

“Good night, Ken. Be safe.”

Chapter 6

Shelly was too busy for the next few weeks to go shopping or to even think about it. LeeAnn had to spend three days in the hospital because her doctor thought she was developing pneumonia and for a woman as weak as her, it left her vulnerable to the flu that was going around. Shelly was worried about what she would pick up in the hospital.

When LeeAnn came back home from the hospital, a neighbor, that was already friendly to LeeAnn, was hired to clean the house and give LeeAnn company. Maria Menchu and LeeAnn had exchanged receipts and herbs before she became ill and since she and her husband Vinicio were always helping out, LeeAnn and Shelly insisted on paying them. LeeAnn said Vinicio had been laid off so they were having trouble making ends meet.

The two women played monopoly like they were out to take over the world and that was what Shelly interrupted when she came home late Friday night. The party was in two hours and Shelly had not remembered to buy anything.

She was dreading going to the party now. She looked over her Levis. For sure, she was wearing Levis. She picked out her western boots with low to the ground heels.

She heard Ken arrive and both Maria and LeeAnn telling him he looked very rich. Shelly groaned to herself.

“Hey, you decent?” Ken asked outside her door.

“Yeah. Even if I was naked, Ken, to you I would be decent.”

Ken opened the door and peered in. “I see you didn’t go shopping.”

He pulled a bag out from behind him. “I did it for you. You owe me. You can pay me back in trade.” He grinned at Shelly’s face. “And I already have it picked out. What do you say? A deal?”

“I don’t know what you see in that sculpture,” she replied. “It was a practice piece. If you want it, you can have it. Deal. What do you have in the bag?”

He pulled out the pants, under things or lack of, and even got her a pair of shoes.

“The shoes are used. But they are your size. I asked LeeAnn. I cleaned everything myself. A movie star was supposed to have worn this stuff, but even if that’s not true, the prices were good. It’s the genuine name brand stuff. You don’t want to be seen with new stuff, but also not well-worn.”

“Panties?”

“Those are new from Victoria Secrets.”

“They didn’t think you were buying these for yourself?” she teased.

He looked at her unbelievably. Ken was twice her size.

“Just kidding. I take it no bra?”

“You have the right size to let them hang. Are you going to be okay with that?” he asked suddenly worried.

“I don’t wear a bra at home so it’s not a new experience. I’ll be okay.”



Two hours later, Ken was pulling into the long-curved driveway. Ken drove a BMW so they didn’t feel too out of class.

“What happens if you see someone with drugs?” Shelly suddenly thought to ask.

“I plan on making it obvious who I am so I don’t have to be seeing that stuff.” His gun bulge was plainly seen.

“You know. These people are stupid enough to try and steal that from you and to challenge you if they get too high,” Shelly worried.

“I’ve been to enough of these parties to be able to keep myself clean. Come on. Let’s go meet your host.”

The same man that opened the door for them originally was opening it again. He was dressed casually and looked like one of the party goers.

“You’re the secretary, right?” Shelly asked.

“I am Mr. Hayes secretary, yes,” he said without warmth or a smile.

“Shelly Abbott. I don’t believe we introduced ourselves.”

“Marvin Hendricks. Since you don’t have coats, the bar is that way, the entertainment is in all the rooms and snacks are to the left of the bar. Mr. Hayes is moving about. Enjoy yourselves.”

“Where to first?” Shelly asked Ken in an undertone.

“Bar. That’s where you can get an idea of the temperature of the party. Are you hungry?” Ken asked.

“It depends on what they have to eat.”

“I suggest you don’t. Whatever you drink, don’t leave it alone and don’t let anyone but the bartender handle it. Also, keep an eye on him preparing it.”

“I think a bottle of water will be my choice.”

Ken smiled and leaned close to her ear. “These people have their own set of rules. You and I, no matter how much money we ever have, will always be on the outside because we didn’t grow up in their grandparents’ class.”

“Okay. I’ll keep that in mind. I feel like a girl from the wrong side of the tracks,” she whispered back.

“You don’t want to be part of their group. Most of them care nothing about people below their station and you’ll find it difficult to understand. They don’t see nor care about

those that were born in less advantageous situations. Remember that. No matter what they say, you and I will always have less value than their pets.”

Shelly nodded. Her eyes fell on a woman that took her breath away. It was the type of woman she would like to stare at but would never associate with because she was too beautiful...until she looked into the woman's eyes. They were vacant.

Ken left her near the door to find a place to stand while he weaved around people to get to the bar. Ken turned heads of both genders. Ken was an average looking man, to Shelly, but he carried himself well, and he dressed nice.

“Hi, Shelly,” Anthony greeted her. He had in tow a woman that had the same frozen face as Anthony's mother.

“This is Cathleen, one of my sisters. She hates your art, but that's a plus in your favor. Every artist she's liked has bombed out.”

“Hi, Anthony. Cathleen, nice to meet you,” Shelly returned, smiling politely but not offering her hand. Cathleen had one hand crossed over her stomach and the other holding a drink and she didn't look like she was interested in shaking hands. Maybe in this society shaking hands was not practiced. No telling what someone would catch here.

Cathleen merely took another sip of her drink. As a couple passed she hailed them and moved off with them.

“Thank God she's gone. She's been attached to me like mother's leech,” he muttered disgustedly. “Marv said you came in with Ken.”

“He's getting me something to drink.”

“Good. You should try the shrimp rolls. I told some friends who admired your work you would be here tonight. They own the Tripoli Art Gallery. Would you be interested in meeting them?”

Shelly thought about it for a few moments.

“They're booked for this year on shows so there's no pressure on coming up with something for the next five months. Besides, should they have a sudden opening, we can cart my seven over to their place and whatever you have in your garage.”

“If they're booked why bring it up? Are you just trying to put pressure on me?” she smiled.

“Not all scheduled showings work out. Maybe the artist produces below show quality or decides not to show or has less than what they need for a good turn-out. A fill-in artist is then used.”

“Oh. Have you been in the business long?”

“What business is that?” Anthony asked surprised.

“Sponsoring new artists?”

“Why do you ask?”

“You said your sister backs losing artists. It sounded like a competitive thing so I'm making the assumption you two compete with up and coming artists.”

“Well, that's almost right. Mother and she compete. My business is real estate.”

“Only he stinks at it. Hi, my names Emily. Emily Myers and you are...”

“Shelly Abbott.”

“Ah. Mother mentioned you being the artist to Anthony's new collection. I had to come and see for myself. Your work is interesting. Do you do it all yourself?”

“This is my other sister and thank the Gods mother only produced two,” he light heartedly informed them. “A guy can only take two busy body sisters at a time.”

Shelly decided the question Emily asked didn't warrant an answer. Obviously, she didn't expect one because her attention was riveted on Ken. He was returning with her drink, water in a chilled bottle and a drink. She already knew Ken didn't drink alcoholic beverages except when he was home or not driving.

Emily's eyes openly devoured Ken. The intimacy embarrassed Shelly.

"Knock it off, Emily," her brother told her impatiently. Emily raised her eyebrows at Anthony, the same eyebrows as their mother, and walked languidly away.

"Hello, Anthony. Nice bar you have there," Ken said.

"It's a replica of an English pub I visited," Anthony said.

"Do you have any more family I need to watch out for?" Shelly asked.

"Two brothers. Only by now they're passed out on the lawn or near the pool. I have to always have someone watching that they don't do something life threatening to themselves. They're over twenty-one and think they're invincible."

"So, in your family, you have three boys and two girls," Shelly tallied.

"Who would have thought from Ashley's loins five babies would survive nine months alone with her." Shelly blinked at the cynical reply.

"Your sisters look just like your mom. Do you look like your dad?"

Anthony smiled. "Spitting image some people tell me. There's only seven of us true BC Hayes offspring."

"True Hayes?"

"The late Bartholomew Clifford Hayes, Theo to those that know him, only produced seven children while his previous wives and what-nots claimed twenty of them were his."

"So, what did they do to prove paternity – blood tests?" Shelly asked.

"Exactly. Everyone that showed up at the reading of the will had to have a certificate that a blood test was done by the court appointed clinic to prove relationship to BCH. It was a circus that even to this day I don't think I'll ever forget."

"When was that?"

"About three years ago," Anthony told her.

"Actually, four," Ken reminded him. "Your father's death made the news four years ago. It took one year for all the parties to agree that the remains of your father were indeed his and he died from natural causes. Then it took another year for the people claiming interest in his estate to be eliminated. The blood test was the big test, and the second were the prenuptials all held-up under the law. Anyone that contested his will was to get nothing. The joke was, those that fought the will were getting nothing anyway and that's why they fought it."

Anthony nodded. "Very good. Myself and Gregory were his true heirs but Gregory was stupid and backed mother's assertion that she deserved more than what she got in her prenuptial and he lost his inheritance from father."

"So, your family is living off you?"

"No." He raised his eyebrows in surprise as if Shelly should know this, "Mother is a Bower. She comes from money and has plenty of her own. Her parents felt sorry for darling Gregory and setup a trust for him. Cathleen, Emily, Gregory and Justin all have their own funds. Watch out for mother. If she gets it under her claw that she doesn't like you, she will find your weaknesses and exploit them. And we all have weaknesses, just to make life interesting."

He said that in a light tone but both Ken and Shelly detected bitterness behind the façade.

“So, your mother doesn’t come to these parties of yours?” Ken asked.

“I prefer her not to visit. Thankfully, it’s once in a blue moon. Cathleen acts as her eyes and ears, though I’m sure whatever is said to mother is lost in the translation. Emily is here to conduct her own business. Everyone is here for something.” He looked around him, his eyes not resting on anyone for too long.

“Just what are you having this party for?” Shelly asked curious.

“I’m like a middleman. I provide the venue and people are here to make their connections.”

“Drugs?” Shelly whispered looking around startled.

Ken and Anthony laughed.

“No. I need to mingle,” Anthony told the two, “but I hope to see you again before you leave.” His eyes rested on Ken but quickly moved away when Ken didn’t respond.

“Anthony,” Shelly said. He turned to look at her. “Did Jose tell you about the needle mother found in the trashcan in the guest bathroom? If you think there’re no drugs, then you’re a lot more naïve than I am.”

Anthony stared at her for a few moments and then nodded and left.

“Your mother found a needle?” Ken demanded in a whisper.

“Yes. I just peeked but didn’t want to look too close because I didn’t want to have anything of me near drugs. I’ve seen two friends go through hell because they were in the same room a drug deal had gone down. Remember Becky and Jay?”

“The two that don’t like cops? I didn’t know that. There are more than a few artists scattered around here. Do you recognize any of them?”

“No, but I don’t hang with other artists,” Shelly said.

“See the guy Emily is talking to over there?”

“He doesn’t look too happy about being here.”

“He’s an art student from UCLA. Did some all right stuff but unless he does something unique in his work, he’s not going to be anything more than a weekend artist. That’s what I heard from the bar gossip.”

“Hey, no jokes about weekend artists,” Shelly told him.

“You have that uniqueness in your work so you don’t need to worry. What he needs is a mentor or sponsor that can help him develop that characteristic.”

“I’m glad I didn’t go to college. I would have gone crazy with all the studying of this and that.”

“Michelle was a good teacher,” he objected. “You just made the mistake of falling in love with her.”

“You just gave me the desire for a hard drink.”

Ken glared at her. “Don’t even joke about that. If you look close, you’ll notice some of these artists here are strung out or on the borderline. I don’t believe drugs or being manic is a requirement for being a talented artist. Come on, sis,” he smiled, “let’s circulate. We can visit the garden and see what your art looks like. Then we can head home if you want.”

They met a dozen people on their way to the garden that were interested in Shelly’s art work. Most of them were artists themselves and asked her about her technique and what inspired her. It was as if she knew *the* answer to creativity while on a

deeper level they were hungry for love and recognition by a world that is too diverse to be loved by everyone.

By three in the morning they left. Shelly was exhausted and Ken said he had more propositions than he would get in a bar and most from the same person. Ken would not say who the person was but Shelly guessed it was Emily.

Chapter 7

Anthony invited her out to restaurants and took her to art galleries that were filled with art that was too abstract for Shelly to enjoy. He insisted she get used to the people so when she made it into the artsy world she would not be overwhelmed and end up burning out before she reached middle age.

Her mother kept warning her to not trust him entirely. He was a Hayes, she told Shelly, as if that was to mean something to her. Meanwhile, her mother was ill more often than not. It was necessary to have a health care worker visit daily. It cost more and Shelly was tempted to mass produce her art work if that would help pay bills but her mother and Ken insisted she not sacrifice her art work.

When her mother spoke of her death, Ken was the calm listener, while Shelly would cry more than not. LeeAnn didn't mind her tears and encouraged them, oftentimes joining her. What art work she produced during this time, reflected death, suffering and bleakness. She didn't offer it for anyone to see. Those finished pieces were moved into a corner of the garage while she started another.

In four months time, LeeAnn's health further deteriorated. She was admitted back into the hospital and Shelly felt she would not survive this visit.

Shelly was holding her mother's cold hands, noticing how small and boney they felt in her warm ones. A small twitch from her mother's hand had her looking up.

"Can I have some water, please?" whispered LeeAnn.

Ken quickly stood up relieved to do something. He gently guided the straw to her parched lips. LeeAnn sucked for a few swallows and then released the straw.

"I want to go home," she told her daughter. "I want to die in my own bed. Please." Her eyes were so plaintive Shelly cried, nodding her understanding. She was absolutely terrified of taking her mother home and that she would die and she wouldn't be able to prevent it. For a brief moment of insight, she realized it wasn't her place to decide for her mother the time and place.

Ken, who had gone through the same thing with his parents understood and went to start the process at the administrator's desk, while Shelly hugged her mother. She held onto a thin frail old woman who mumbled soft words of encouragement to her.

Her mother died the second night she was at home, surrounded by her close friends. Her funeral was attended by a lot of people Shelly didn't know. LeeAnn had once been the executive assistant to the CEO of a large firm. Shelly was surprised that Anthony showed up, appearing pale and not well. He explained he caught the flu but didn't want to miss saying goodbye to her mother.

For the next four months, Shelly was buried in work and selling her mother's house for medical bills. H. McKinney, of Parker and Associates was leaving messages that there was some business of her mother's that still needed tending to, like the reading of her will. The office left voice mail messages and she was sent letters, but she was focused on finding a new home for her and her art since the house sold quickly.

"Shelly, you have messages on this phone. Aren't you going to answer them?" Ken asked as he lumbered by the blinking red light with another box to the front room.

"They're just advertisements," Shelly called back from her mother's room.

"I bet my message is one of those. You saving them?" He joined Shelly in LeeAnn's room. They were boxing LeeAnn's few belongings and getting them ready for a local social group. LeeAnn had been preparing for her passing for a while, they both noted. She had things labeled on whom to give them to and she didn't have anything that would be considered junk. This was difficult for Shelly to realize.

"No wonder she was so tired. She was always cleaning out stuff," Shelly said.

"Looks like she was getting ready to..." Ken stopped suddenly and glanced at Shelly.

"You don't have to worry about saying she was ready to die, Ken. She told me she was. In fact, she's been saying that for about a year. I just was ignoring it."

Shelly pushed the button on the voice messages, heard a few words, erased the first message and went on to the next. In quick succession she did this, cleaning the tape of messages.

"That was five from the lawyer and two realtors and there's me, and another from the lawyer and from Margaret Stuart. Stuart – isn't she your financial advisor?" He wagged a finger at her. "Shelly if you want the repeated calls to stop, return them."

"I'm busy, Ken. I have classes to take and work to keep up with, I have mother's business to wrap up, and I've been looking all over the place for a place to rent and there just isn't enough hours in the day for me to keep up with it all," she said upset. She could hear the tears in her voice. She ached for her mother and felt near hysterical from exhaustion.

"You get grouchy when you don't get in some creative time," Ken noted. "Listen. Call your mother's lawyer. I'm sure the lawyer and Margaret know each other and maybe they can give you some assistance with something."

"And then I get billed. I can't take on any more bills, Ken."

"Well, of course you ask them how much their advice will cost you and if nothing, listen to what they have to say."

"You said you're looking for a place too. What city? Do you want to share rent? Then if either of our cars breaks down, we won't have far to walk to borrow the others," she joked. "That's what family's do for each other," she reminded him.

"That's a good idea. I could borrow your truck for some of the stuff I sometimes end up picking up for friends. You still want to move close to the beach?"

Both laughed at Ken's friends that had big shiny trucks and SUVs that they didn't want to scratch or dent with hauling things.

“I’m looking for a studio with a garage. The garage needs to be where I won’t worry that someone will burglarize it when I’m not looking.”

Ken nodded. “Well, I’ll keep my eyes peeled for anything. Sharing rent sounds good. Our hours are different so it’s not like we’ll be bumping into each other. You like something small like no more than eight apartments per unit, right?”

“You got it.” She picked up her mother’s address book and looked up the lawyer’s number.

“While you’re doing that, I’m going to go over to the sandwich shop and pick up lunch for us. You still on the soup diet?”

“Yes,” she replied distractedly as she dialed. “Hello, this is Shelly Abbott. I’m returning... Yes, Mrs. McKinney’s calls. Is she my mother’s... I mean LeeAnn Abbott’s lawyer?... Manager? Well no I don’t want to make an appointment. I really don’t have time. Can’t she just write me a letter or tell me over the phone... Oh, reading her will. It has to be a formal thing?... Okay. Well, let me get back to Mrs. McKinney... Yes, I know. Before the end of the year I need to sign some papers. Good bye.” She hung up and moved to the next name – Margaret Stuart. “Hi, Margaret, this is Shelly. Just calling to touch bases with you. I’m packing up the last of mom’s stuff today. By the end of the week the house should be ready to be turned over to the new owner. When his check clears, can you dump it into the account the hospital is billing and then let me know how much more I owe? Thanks and bye.”

She hung up glad it was Margaret’s voice mail. She was not in the mood to talk. The phone rang and she automatically picked it up, regretting it just as she put the phone to her ear.

“Ms. Shelly Abbott?” a polite voice asked.

“Yes, this is she,” she answered suspiciously.

“This is Halley McKinney. We met very briefly at your mother’s funeral. Is there a reason why you can’t see me sometime this week?”

“Yes,” Shelly replied impatiently. “I have to move out of this house by the end of the week and as of yet I haven’t found a place to move to.” *I met her lawyer? I can’t remember everyone I met but I think I would remember a voice.*

“I’ll make a deal with you. You make an appointment for this week, and I’ll give you four addresses to look at.”

“Eh. Just how much is the rent going to be and are any of them near the beach, cheap, and has a garage? And it has to have two bedrooms,” she added, thinking of Ken.

“Not asking for much, are you? Two bedrooms?”

“I’m sharing the rent. It’s got to have a garage for...”

“Your art work. Yes, your mother said you were an artist. One of the properties we manage did have an artist living in it. The garage is attached to the large room that could be a bedroom on the first floor and there is one room in the loft above the dining room. It’s about a ten-minute walk to the beach. Close enough?”

“How much?”

“You’ll be able to afford it even without a roommate. I can guarantee that. Now, your part of the deal...”

“I have classes on Monday and Wednesday night. I’m working overtime on Friday night and Saturday. That leaves Tuesday or Thursday evening after seven.” She was looking at the address of the firm and knew traffic was going to be slow getting into

Beverly Hills. She also had to fit in moving her things into the new place and getting her address change into the post office.

“Okay. You’re busy. How about if I just give you the address and after you’re settled in your new place, you give me a call. Remember we have a deadline to get your mother’s will and her investments taken care of.”

“Investments?” Shelly was thinking it would be something very small, made smaller with death taxes from the State and Federal government. “Listen, can you talk to my mother’s ...I mean can you call Margaret Stuart? She’s handling the finances.” Shelly could feel her face heating up at the embarrassment that she still needed someone to help her figure out the bills. Untangling her finances and her mother’s was mystifying for her. “I just write checks and pay bills and hope I don’t spend more than what I make.”

“I know Margaret very well. I’ll call her. Here’s the address to the artist’s loft....”

Shelly scribbled it down and worried when she was going to get over to see it. Now that she was thinking about it, Tuesday she was supposed to spend time studying and Thursday was the day she set aside for moving. Shelly rang off with the lawyer after saying her polite good bye and felt exhausted.

“Hey,” Ken’s voice called from the doorway.

She looked up and hurried to open the screen door. “Why so much?”

“There’s a new Chinese restaurant on my corner and I wanted to try it. Since we’ve packed the silverware, I brought plastic.”

As Ken laid out the food containers on the floor Shelly realized she was hungry.

“This is good,” she hummed. “By the way, I spoke to Halley McKinney and she says they manage property and have one available that’s on the beach. It has a bedroom in the loft and one adjoining the garage. Are you still open for sharing rent? If it’s doable I would like the room next to the garage.”

“Sleeping with your art? When was the last time you had a roommate and I’m not counting your mother?”

“Three years ago.”

“Was that when I spent a few months with you until I found a place?”

“No. Before then. I remember that. Your roommate and latest love threw you out on your booty.” Shelly waved her fork at him, with him entangling his chop sticks with her fork, as they dueled for a few minutes.

“I don’t mind. Let’s first check the place out. A loft huh?”

“I’ll give you the address. Can you check it out? You have days free so you can see if it’s a safe place. I’ll drive by at night and see if it’s okay.”

“Team work. Okay.”

Chapter 8

“Ken, I can pay off these bills if I sell my equipment. It’s not like I’ve had time lately to work and I’m too tired to even think about ideas. It’s only for a while. I can buy equipment back or rent it if I get inspired,” Shelly argued. “We’re lucky there’s no first and last month due.”

Ken studied Shelly, seeing the strain of the last few years in the lines around her eyes. “Shelly, we are just two very sorry individuals when it comes to finances. We’ll make it.”

“Yeah, well mine isn’t from someone sticking it to me. Mine is because I have too many blasted emergencies. If it’s not one thing it’s another. Mom had to keep bailing me out. It’s very embarrassing.”

“You’re not counting her medical bills, huh?”

“I can’t remember ever not living from paycheck to paycheck. I’m not manic or even obsessive with my spending so I think it’s just plain poor budgeting.”

Ken snorted. “Well, my finances were fine until Mac. I’ll help you figure out what you’re doing that keeps you in the hole. Aren’t you paying off that student loan?”

Shelly slapped her forehead. “That’s it! I forgot all about it. They take out the payment from my check. It seems like I’ve been paying it forever.”

“Well, how much is it?”

“I think about six hundred a month.” She breathed a sigh of relief. She had forgotten. Then she started to laugh. “So, I’m not really broke, just paying off bills. You know what’s funny? I purposely arranged it that way so I wouldn’t have to worry about putting the money away to make the monthly payments. If I get fired or laid off, they’ll just deduct it from my 401K and the Feds can tax the heck out of me.”

“Not a bad plan. Did you make the appointment with the lawyer yet?”

Shelly groaned. She had. “Tomorrow. I forgot. Oh! Did she call you? She said mom left you something and she needed you to call her. She left Maria and Vinicio Menchu something too.” She smiled remembering the friendship the three developed.

“You just reminded me, I need to send them a deposit slip. I told them to just dump whatever she left me in there. It’s nice of your mother to think of me. I’ve got to get to work. Don’t stay up too late worrying – and we will get your equipment back.”



Wednesday afternoon during her lunch break, Shelly stopped at the lockbox her mother and her had shared to pick up documents the lawyer may want. Since Shelly had not gone through her mother’s sealed envelopes her conscience was telling her she needed to at least know what the contents were about. There were three brown envelopes with numbers on the tops of each. She took the three with her.

Back at her apartment, she opened one of the large envelopes and carefully pulled out the contents. Peering inside she found loose pictures and a lot of newspaper clippings. Pouring the rest out onto her bed she picked through the pictures.

“Mother,” she whispered. “What have you done?” Two young people were embraced in an intimate posture with eyes not on the photographer but on each other. A newly married caption was under the picture. She picked up another picture. It was a close up of a more mature Anthony Hayes but with LeeAnn!

She picked up the folded document. It was a birth certificate. This was not the name she was used to. Shelly LeeAnn Hayes. Was this her or a child that had died? The date was the same as her birth date. There was another official document. Arthur Abbott officially adopted Shelly LeeAnn Hayes, changing her name to Shelly Lyn Abbott.

“How come I never knew? I would have to,” she muttered to herself. Then she became angry. Anthony Hayes knew. And her mother knew who Anthony Hayes was because he looked like the man in the pictures her mother was embracing.

“You sonofabitch. Mother said not to trust you.” She picked up her cell phone and dialed Anthony’s cell number.

“Hello.”

“You sonofabitch. You knew I was related to you and you didn’t say anything. Why did you buy my art? Why? Did you feel sorry for us? Well I don’t need your help.” She punched the drop button with so much force the cell went flying out of her hand. For some inexplicable reason, Shelly wept, wishing her mother was with her.

Her cell phone alarm reminded her that she needed to be on the road. Sniffling, she stuffed the photos and papers into the envelope and not wanting to see what surprises were in the others, merely tucked them under her arm as she grabbed her keys and pulled the door closed behind her. From her new residence in Santa Monica, Beverly Hills was not that far but the stop and go traffic and traffic lights made it laborious. She arrived a few minutes late.

She glanced in the rearview mirror before she exited her truck, suddenly remembering that she had reddened eyes. Sunglasses were donned.

Parker and Associates was on the third floor and the building had a parking lot below it. She tucked the parking ticket in her pocket, hoping they would pay for her parking.

A serious looking woman sat at the front desk. Peering on the other side of her, there were other front desks and many glassed in offices.

“May I help you,” a man coming in behind her asked.

She turned to see him. He had two thick books in his hands and a legal pad on top of the books.

“I’m here to see McKinney.”

The woman at the first desk pointed to an office down the row of doors on one wall. “Ms. Abbott, Mr. Parker will see you. Ms. McKinney has been delayed.”

“Let me walk you in that direction, since I’m headed that way, Ms. Abbott,” he smiled too widely.

When men younger than her smiled at her that way, Shelly always felt something was out of place.

The young man tapped on the door to Mr. Parker’s office. A woman holding a pad opened the door.

“Ms. Abbott, please come in. Mr. Parker is ready for you. Hello, Andrew. Back I see.” Andrew seemed suddenly interested in being about other business.

“Can I get you anything to drink, Ms. Abbott?”

“No thanks. I’m fine.”

Shelly recognized Mr. Parker as one of the people at her mother’s funeral that she had not known. The secretary left the room once she was sure Mr. Parker had no further need of her.

“Ms. Abbott, I am sorry to hear about your mother’s passing. The last time I had seen her was at your father’s funeral services looking every bit fit.”

“Seventeen years is a long time,” Shelly mentioned, curious about this long business relationship that she was not aware of.

Mr. Parker looked surprised. "It was actually four years ago at B C Hayes' funeral. I didn't see you there," he added.

For a few moments, Shelly sat there blinking in confusion and then remembering with embarrassment what she had found in her mother's papers only hours before. Her face reddened at being caught not knowing about her mother's business. It was not so much as LeeAnn was a very private person, it was also that Shelly was reluctant to be in her business. Why she felt that way was a mystery since LeeAnn answered every question Shelly ever asked her.

"I see," Mr. Parker said thoughtfully, "she didn't tell you. I was hoping she would change her mind about letting you know about your father's family. Her argument was that she didn't want to bring them into her life. You've inherited a fortune. That's what Halley was attempting to prepare you for as well as other legal matters concerning your mother's estate."

"A fortune? How did I get a fortune? Did mother have a lot of money?"

"You inherited from two sources. Let me start from the beginning. BC Hayes and your mother were married. Your mother was not what CG Hayes, the Hayes patriarch had arranged for BC. Your parents were three days into their honeymoon when CG's handlers found them. Their marriage was annulled and as far as the Hayes family was concerned, done with. You were the result of their honeymoon."

"You're saying this man was my father for real?" Her voice rose as she tried to put this new revelation into perspective with all the other information.

"Yes. Blood tests confirmed BC or Theo as your father. Theo took his paternity very seriously, even after your mother's marriage to Arthur Abbott. If LeeAnn wanted to never work again he would have taken care of her financially."

Shelly looked down at the three envelopes she was clutching. "Why did she remarry if she didn't have to? Why did she change my name?"

"I gather you haven't looked through her papers."

"I just opened one. It had my birth certificate and adoption papers with pictures of mother and BC Hayes," she said distracted. He could have helped her mother. Then she remembered her mother's independent mindset and the fact that he was dead before she got sick. "Why was my name changed?" she asked curious.

"LeeAnn married to have her name changed and yours. It was to keep your existence a secret."

"You mean from the Hayes?" Shelly sounded skeptical.

"And others."

"They aren't the mafia are they?" she asked nervously.

A light rapping on the door then it opened had Shelly turning to see who it was. A serious looking brunette had Shelly sitting back in her chair, relieved at the interruption. Her resemblance to Mr. Parker was apparent. Both were tanned, had tall athletic builds, hazel eyes, and she had a sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

"Hi, am I too late?"

"No, not at all, Halley. Ms. Abbott, this is my daughter and manager of your estate, Mrs. Halley McKinney. She just was asking what we manage for her."

Halley came over and gave a firm handshake then took a seat near her father's chair. Shelly noted that Halley looked nice in heels and a dark green business suit. There was no smell of perfume and her makeup was light. Her hair was tied back as if it were

done professionally, not a hair out of place. Shelly couldn't understand how people could look as if they stepped out of a finishing booth in the middle of the day.

"I'll just sit here and you go on, father."

"Well, I was hoping you would get here because you're more familiar with her portfolio," he told her smiling.

Shelly could feel the warmth and comfort the two had with each other. It wasn't something she had with her adopted father, Arthur but he was so little in her life it was in name only that she knew him. Would BC Hayes have been an interested father?

"Okay. The irony of this is that you're staying at one of your properties. So, paying rent isn't necessary. I tried to tell you but decided to wait until we met and discussed your entire inheritance," Halley said.

"I'm sorry. I was really busy and feeling overwhelmed. But, I'm here now," she said smiling to erase the frustration she may have caused Halley. The idea that she didn't have to pay rent gave her a nice feeling. "What else are you managing of mother's?"

"Actually, it was in both your names and when she realized she was ill she relinquished her shares. You signed the papers..." Halley left that statement hanging.

"I remember signing things, but I didn't ask what it was because it was her business."

"Our office has been handling BC's finances since he was a boy and when he married your mother we also handled her finances, even after their annulment. BC had setup accounts in your name before you were born, and added to them throughout his life; therefore, were never part of his estate. We're hoping that you find our work to your liking. If you wish for an audit, let us know and we'll have everything ready for whomever you hire."

The only sound was the ticking of a clock as Shelly sat in shocked silence. "Where does Anthony Hayes come into this?" she asked.

"He's your half-brother from Theo's second wife, Ashley. He's a month younger than you."

"I didn't know I had any siblings."

"Your mother didn't want any of the Hayes heirs to know about you."

"Why?"

The father and daughter were quiet for only a moment to exchange looks. Whatever the silent agreement was, Halley spoke first.

"To paraphrase your mother, they're extraordinarily rude, mean hearted, arrogant, ignorant, don't know the value of work, and haven't any common sense to carry on a worthwhile conversation."

"How did Anthony know I was a Hayes?"

"He said it was a mixture of chance and luck. It was something that was bound to happen eventually. We also handle his business."

"Anthony isn't any of those things. Though, I met his mother and his sisters and they would easily fall within mother's description. Just what exactly am I being protected from?"

"Ashley Bower Hayes Bullock Sexton. Theo's second wife and Anthony's mother."

"Why?"

“Entitlement is what Ashley Bower is about. She is the epitome of what most people would see as the character who feels she is privileged nobility,” Parker said dryly. “The Bowers and Hayes had a family agreement that Ashley would marry Theo. Theo had a stubborn streak and went off to marry a woman he loved instead of relegating her as a mistress. Ashley doesn’t forget what she perceives as an insult. When Theo was forced back into the family fold, he took measures to prevent Ashley’s agents from locating your mother. When you were born,” Parker smiled, “your father was thrilled. He made sure both you and your mother would be self-sufficient separate of the Hayes money and snoops.”

Shelly’s ear pricked up at the words “self-sufficient.”

“But mother worked until she retired. You mean I don’t have to keep up my full-time job?”

“Your mother valued the work ethic. And no, you don’t have to have a full-time job. You can afford to live lavishly anywhere you want.”

“I need to pay off the money I borrowed from my 401K for a student loan, and then there’s the credit cards, mother’s medical bills and, will I still have enough money to not have to work if all of those bills are paid?” she asked hopefully.

The two looked startled. “Why yes. You can quit your job and pay off whatever bills you owe, and still live very comfortably. That’s why...”

“You wanted to speak with me,” Shelly intoned with irritation. “If I had known I had money I would have used it to make sure mother lived comfortably.”

“Which was exactly what she didn’t want, and why we could not get in touch with you until her death,” Halley explained. “But now you’re here you can sign documents and get yourself set up for living well and independently. Do you need some funds now? Will twenty thousand do, or do you need more?”

“I need to pinch myself,” she said soberly. “Gods, but that just screwed up my view of the world.”

“Having money will change your world,” Halley agreed. “If you want Margaret to pay your bills you’ll need to sign documents that will allow her to and she can setup credit cards for you.”

Shelly’s eyes opened wide. “I think it would be better if I pay my own bills. I don’t want to be out of touch of what I spend, then I’ll never learn to balance my check book. Mother will haunt me if I...” Her voice caught. Mr. Parker quickly handed her a tissue. “Thanks, but I really need to learn to balance my checkbook.”

“Well, balancing would be a grand task. You can start with keeping track of what you spend. When you get over your head you can ask for help. LeeAnn had a good head for business and finances and knew what to let others manage,” Parker said.

Papers were laid out on the table and Halley McKinney and John Parker explained in simple terms what it was she was signing. Two hours later, still in a daze, it was agreed she would leave everything as it was until she could get together for a more in depth look at her finances with Margaret present. Shelly had no idea what she was looking at or maybe it was the shock – she was rich.

Her first stop was at an ATM machine to deposit the \$20,000 dollar check.

Chapter 9

Shelly lifted her head from her pillow and stared bleary eyed at the alarm. She had to get up for work. She sighed heavily and struggled out of bed. Standing in the shower, with her hands braced against the wall she recalled the nice dream she had. She had enough money not to have to work anymore. She owned property and was an heiress of...

“Oh, gods, mother. I can’t believe I dreamed something like that.”

The phone was ringing but she was determined she was not going to be dragged out of the shower to answer it.

Finished with her shower she made a detour into the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee that turned on automatically at five am. It was Ken’s but sharing a coffee maker was not a problem. Her not using the built-in dish washer was.

“No coffee. I can’t believe it wasn’t even turned on.” Quickly she pulled out the fixings and rushed through making it while silently cursing herself for forgetting something as vital as that.

Forgetting this one ritual seemed to put the rest of her morning into an unbalanced tilt. Besides having a problem finding something to wear, the morning’s survival of the bumper-to-bumper traffic was more irritating than usual. At lunch, she forgot her purse at her desk and had to run back to get it. By then most of her lunch time was gone. She ended up bringing her desert back to her desk with the intention of eating it on her break.

While typing in the call she just finished her Instant Messenger dinged.

“*You had a personal call,*” John messaged her.

She looked over at him sitting in the cubicle next to hers.

“Don’t tease. Tell me who it was or I’ll put sugar in your tea,” she messaged back.

“*Ken called.*”

She typed back, “Did he say why he called?”

“*Nope. I’m just letting you know he called. I overheard the conversation that it was going to be logged into your files that you’re getting personal calls. Sounds like he’s keeping track of that too.*”

Shelly looked over in the direction of the thorn in her side. That person was away from his desk.

“Thanks,” she messaged back.

Maybe I should look for another department to work for, she thought. Opening her purse to look for her wallet she noticed a white envelope with the name of a law office on it. Her hand hovered over her purse, remembering that in her dream that was what the \$20,000 check was handed to her in. In the dream, she had deposited it. She opened the envelope and it was empty. Logging onto the Internet she accessed her bank account.

“Oh, gods,” she whispered. “It’s not a dream?”

Quickly she pulled out her cell and found the number of Parker and Associates office. She called Halley McKinney’s number.

“Yes, this is Shelly Abbott, can I speak with Mrs. McKinney.... I’m at work.... No, I mean yes. I was wondering if it was a dream.... It isn’t. And you’re sure I can quit

this job?" she whispered. "Well, if you're wrong you'll be supporting me until I can make it as an artist," she laughed nervously.

Shelly hung up, logged off her phone. She looked over her desk, opened her drawer and looked over what she would want to take with her.

Nothing.

"Shelly, what's going on?" Jack, the supervisor demanded.

Since he monitored her phone conversations and conversations with fellow coworkers it was not worth the effort to reply. Jack Russe and her never did get along as coworkers and even less when he was promoted to tyrant.

"Nothing much. I'm fine."

"Then why did you sign off?"

"Well," she said slowly as she looked around her desk again. There was nothing worth taking with her.

"John, you see anything here that's mine, it's yours," she spoke over her PC monitor to John.

She picked up her purse and left her desk key on her desk. It didn't matter if she locked her things up; someone had a key. It was amazing how petty some people became if they didn't like you. Since her mother's illness she no longer felt compelled to play the petty games or one-up-man-ship and found that by not playing, the petty games became more vindictive. It was nice to be leaving.

"Where are you going, Shelly?" Jack's voice deepened as if warning her about something.

"I'm going down to personnel. Want to come along?" She didn't mean it seriously.

Suddenly he looked worried. "Why? Why? You can't go down there!"

Shelly gave him a strange look and left the room. *What's wrong with him? Oooh. He's afraid of me going down to personnel to complain about him. Well, I'm finished with the games and I don't have to play them.*

She found there were two guards waiting for her in personnel. She was escorted out of the building with her demanding to know what was going on without seeing anyone.

As she turned her car engine on she steamed at not knowing what happened. "Oh, hell, what do I care anyway? Hey, I have a lawyer," she chortled. She dialed Halley's number.

"Halley, please... She did? Okay, well, this is Shelly... Yes... Yes, please. Thank you." She hung up her cell phone and then headed out the gate. In her rearview mirror she watched what she was hoping was the last time she had to see that parking lot.

She stopped at the grocery store for groceries. When it came to what gallon of ice cream to buy she found herself putting in whatever struck her fancy. As she rolled to the checkout stand she realized she had five gallons of ice cream. She reversed her cart and headed back to the freezers. She bought her five flavors in pints. It made her feel better about this compromise.



Anthony's Hummer was parked in her parking space, so she parked in Ken's. Shelly frowned at Ken's empty space. He should be sleeping.

"I guess he found someone to spend the day with," she muttered to herself, feeling saddened. She didn't have someone to share her good news with, except with Anthony. How ironic.

Anthony waved to her from his vehicle. Standing in front of his high vehicle she studied him. He looked pale. She held up her bag of ice cream. "I'm going to celebrate my good fortune. Care to join me?"

Anthony smiled.

"So," Shelly showed him into the kitchen. "What brings you to my door?"

"I want to apologize and say I was not doing anything to harm you," he answered.

"Have a seat. Any of these flavors you like?"

"Rocky Road. Two scoops, thanks." He accepted the spoon and waited for her to join him.

"So, why did you buy all my work?" Shelly asked.

"Because it's good. Really. I wasn't lying when I said that."

"You knew I was your sister when you came to look at the art," she accused.

"I did. I learned of you from Michelle Keloviski."

If he was watching her face and not concentrating on his ice cream, he would have seen Shelly's expression of shock.

"When she mentioned your mother's name I knew who you were. Since I didn't want to lose my inheritance by not following the rules of acquisition, I was overjoyed when I found one of your flyers at the mall. Turning up was not breaking any rules. And you are good. Michelle, before she moved to the East coast, told me to keep an eye out for your work because she thought you would make a big hit."

"Michelle said that?" she asked unsteadily. Longing for what she could not have made her heart hurt. It also reminded her that Michelle's shutting her out from their relationship so abruptly left her with some issues Ken kept reminding her she needed to see a counselor about.

He studied her expression, then shook his head sorrowfully. "You were one of her conquests, huh? Well, she does that. She's burnt out her welcome on this side of the continent." Anthony gave her a weak smile, however Shelly recognized it from his not feeling well. Being around her mother she learned to recognize that look.

"What's wrong with you, Anthony?"

"Nothing contagious. So, how's your art coming along?"

"It's not. I've been busy of late. But now that I no longer have an eight to five job to support, I'm picturing all sorts of time to work on my projects." Her face lit up at the thought.

"It's going to take discipline and arranging a new schedule so you don't squander your time." He grinned at Shelly's stubborn look. He saw that same look if he looked in the mirror when he was being ordered to do something he didn't want to do. "Okay," he said lightly, "don't believe me. But I've seen it with too many artists that suddenly don't have their usual schedule to give them secure boundaries to create within. Suddenly all their new free time leaves them lost. They hook up with other artists and soon it's downhill from there. Booze, drugs, sex, wild living and lost time to create..." he trailed off still smiling.

"Ah. I see," Shelly chuckled.

Both concentrated on their ice cream for a while.

“I think you’re right in some respects,” Shelly admitted after a while. “I remember before mother got too ill to join me when I worked, I really felt productive between seven in the evening till about midnight. During the day, while I went about life, that’s when I would get ideas.”

“Walk along the boardwalk and get ideas,” he suggested.

“Well, that will get old fast. I’m more of a ‘doer’ than just ‘walking along’ type-of-gal.” She grinned at Anthony’s indication he would like more ice cream if she was offering. She rose to get them both another scoop. “My mother had me working for various nonprofit agencies when I was a kid and through my high school years. Maybe I’ll look into something like that.”

“My mother would have thrown a fit if we mixed with people so stupid they’re poor and too stupid to get out of being poor.” He shrugged. “One of mother’s favorite refrains, is ‘God made them poor and us wealthy for a reason.’”

“I guess she doesn’t give to charities,” Shelly mentioned casually.

“She doesn’t *give* anything,” he reported. “It’s in her genes.”

“And you?”

“I was lucky and had father, grandfather and grandmother Hayes looking out for me. I don’t think I’ve ever spent time alone with mother except during the pregnancy. I had a nanny from day one, grew up in grandmother’s house, and then I went away to school when I was old enough. Mother didn’t take interest in any of her off-spring until we became a commodity to her.”

“Why have children then?”

“To carry on family tradition,” he smiled. “So, it must have made you feel good to tell your job you’re quitting.”

“I didn’t get a chance.” Her brow furrowed in puzzlement. “I picked up my purse after lunch, and headed down to personnel to quit and see just what I need to do to get my tax forms and last paycheck, arrange for my 401K loan to be paid off and so on, when my supervisor got panicky about me going down there and had two guards waiting for me. They escorted me off the premises. That was so strange.”

“I must have missed something. Start this story from the beginning,” he urged.

Shelly started with her arriving at work a few minutes late and getting caught up in the business of the helpdesk. Only after lunch did she realize she didn’t have to be working anymore. Shelly didn’t omit receiving a call from Ken, because she was irritated she was not informed of the call.

“Ah, I got the picture now. It sounds like your supervisor and you don’t get along.”

“Never have. We used to work together. He was interested in promotions however he could get them, and I wasn’t. Art is my passion, not the job that pays my bills.”

“It also sounds like he was afraid you were going to report him for something,” he suggested.

Shelly laughed. “Oh, right. What do I care? I didn’t care about their politics then and I don’t now. They couldn’t fire me because I’ve taken the classes he insisted I take and I have a high phone call intake. For a while he was calling me over every other day and critiquing my calls to the point that I was about to go to HR, which then he cut the overt harassing. But I don’t care...”

“Sure you do. You want to know why you were escorted out. Get Parker and Associates on it. They handle all my business matters.”

“Your what?”

“I own a real estate office among other things.” He suddenly started coughing.

“I hope you’re seeing someone about that cough.”

Anthony nodded. “I’m going to get going. It’s really nice that you’re not mad at me, Shelly.”

Shelly gave him a heartfelt hug. “Thanks. I’ve never known that I had family besides mom...and Ken. I’d like to get to know you better. Though Ken and I mutually adopted each other...well, you’re blood...,” she paused trying to sort out just what the difference was between blood and heart choices. She really considered Ken as her older brother and now things were out of kilter. Didn’t her mother once tell her that relationships were static and full of contention? That had been about six months after Michelle Keloviski dropped her and she was able to breathe without it hurting so much.

“You don’t have to explain. I didn’t like my siblings, half or otherwise until I met you. I think you have promise. Of course, I haven’t seen your dark side yet. I have to go. Can I see you again, just to keep in touch?” Anthony asked.

“To make sure my art work is not hitting the skids, huh?”

“Doesn’t all work take a dip now and then? It’s being able to take the time to figure out what’s missing and go on from there. I learned that from Halley.”

Chapter 10

The phone ringing woke Shelly from a nap. She was having such a bizarre dream she was trying to make sense of it as she stumbled to the phone.

“Hello?”

“Shelly, this is Halley. I understand you were trying to reach me...”

“Yes...” For a few moments, she was at loss and then remembered her job separation, “Oh, yes. My previous employer, Hobart Industries.” A smirk was difficult to repress at the thought of ‘previous’ and she was sure her voice carried the feeling because she heard Halley’s chuckle. “I was on my way down to HR – personnel, to give my notice but I never made it to the office.” A frown replaced the smirk and her voice changed as her puzzlement was telegraphed over the line. “I was escorted off the premises or to the parking lot and I don’t know why. Is there a way I can find out what that’s all about without causing a stink?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. I’ll call you when I get something. We opened a new account for you at another bank where funds will be deposited regularly into that account and you won’t have a hold placed on any large amounts deposited into it.”

“Right. It’s best not to keep all my money in one bank. The Feds only insure up to a certain amount,” Shelly said in jest.

“Does that mean you don’t want to close the other account?”

“No. I have a safe deposit box at Lincoln and I know the two clerks that take care of the boxes. I need an account open there to have the box.” She remembered that if her

account balance was over a certain amount, her box would be free. She shook her head amused. Did bank fees really matter now?

“Okay. We’ll keep funds in that account too. You’ll need to sign papers with the bank in Margaret’s presence. You’ll get a card, checks and whatever else you need a few days after you sign the signature card. You’ll need to set up an appointment with Margaret for that. Do you need any cash advances until then?”

“Ah, no. I’m, well I was intending on buying some art equipment but I think I’ll shop around a bit. No, I’m fine. Thanks.” She had her ATM debit card from Lincoln with a lot of money in the checking account to use.

“You have my cell number on my card. Call anytime you need anything.”

The thought ran through Shelly’s mind of calling her at midnight or three am just to see what she would say. “Uh, okay. Bye.” *Behave yourself*, she scolded herself.

Shelly made some coffee and sat in front of Ken’s computer. “Let’s see what equipment there’s to buy. I’ve got lots of money to spend.”

It was dark and late at night by the time Shelly had an idea at what she was going to put in her garage and how she was going to fix it up to be her studio. Then she became concerned about the building codes and made a mental note to call City Hall for that information the next morning.



A phone ringing woke her up the next morning. She suspected this was going to be a habit in her new life.

“Yeah,” she mumbled.

“Hey, what’s going on, Shelly? I called your work to leave another message for you and got fed a bunch of trash about you. John said you were fired.” Ken’s voice sounded worried.

“Fired? Did they say for what? Jeeze, I was going down to HR to quit and the next thing I know I’m being escorted out the building.”

“John said there’s so much gossip going around about you, he has no idea what’s true and what’s not. All he knows is that you told him he could have anything on or in your desk and you left. What made you quit...finally?”

“I’m going to work as an artist fulltime...” she started. In the background she could hear a horn honking.

“Hey! Good for you girl,” he interrupted, hurriedly. *“Look, I can’t talk any longer. I have to go. I’m in Arizona on a two-week vacation with a friend. That’s what I’ve been trying to reach you for. We need voice mail on this phone. The opportunity came up suddenly and I was able to get the time off so I took it.”*

“Well you have fun. And don’t worry about me,” she reassured him quickly.

“I wish I was there for you. I have to go, my rides honking like crazy. Bye.” The other line hung up before she got the receiver away from her ear.

“Must be a hot number for all the rushing.” Rolling out of bed, Shelly’s thoughts turned to what she was going to do with herself in the morning hours.

“I need to get over to Habitat for Humanity and tell them I’m available again. Building houses is fun.” That would be later. “Exercise. Now that’s a novelty.” Pulling out her worn tennis shoes and sweats she decided to give running along the walkway on

the beach a shot. According to Ken who exercised daily, it was a great place to see all sorts of people.



Shelly was groaning to herself mentally as she stood under the warm shower. *Of course, runners make it look easy. They've been doing it a long time. I know I'm going to be sore tomorrow. I went way too far. What I'd give for a masseuse.*

Yes! I can go to a masseuse. Ooooh. I can join a gym...or I can buy my own equipment and have the masseuse come to my house. Wow. I'm spending lots of money before I get a budget. I think I'll wait until next week's meeting with Margaret and Halley. Who would ever have thought even the people with money have to live within a budget to be able to spend as if they had no budget. I wonder how long I can live without making any money on my art? All that property must take money for the upkeep and paying people to manage it.

I'm a boss now, she marveled.

Dressing she felt overwhelmed with responsibility. It meant to her that people were making money from managing her money, so if she should spend too much people would be out of business.

"Oh, Shelly, you are thinking way too much. Mother would be admonishing you with Wait and see what you have before you worry about it."

Shelly chuckled to herself, and then burst into tears. By noon she was down to sniffles and decided to focus on a project. How to set up her work area was what made her feel better. Her first studio. Of course, it all was dependent on if she could use the garage for her work.

Ding! Dong!

"And I'm going to replace that stupid sound for something less irritating so I don't mind NOT answering it," she muttered.

Peering out of window peep she pulled the door open quickly.

"Are we disturbing you?" Halley asked. Margaret was with her and both looked fashionably dressed in jeans and T-shirts and sports coat. They looked like they shopped at the same store. If Margaret was not in her late fifties and Halley straight and much younger, Shelly would have thought they were a number.

"No. I was just driving myself crazy with adjusting to my new life of leisure but not knowing how leisure I can get and for how long."

"Margaret thought you would be in a quandary. She talked me into doing casual today and all of us going out to lunch. You can ask us whatever comes to mind."

"I know my clients," Margaret joked.

"Let me change real quick," Shelly excused herself.

"You're fine the way you are," Margaret told her. "We're eating around here, not Beverly Hills, thank gods."

"Okay. Come on in and I'll get my purse."

She stopped in the kitchen and turned off the coffee pot and was about to roll up her drawing of the garage when Halley spotted it.

"What's this?"

"I was trying to figure out how to fix up the garage for my workshop. I first need to find out if it passes city code for a welding studio..."

“No. It won’t as it is. That’s why the last artist left. You would have to vent it. The sprinklers are in because he put them in but he wasn’t willing to pay for the vents and neither were we. I paid for the materials for the pipe or what receipts he presented when he vacated.”

“Okay, so then I need a work bench, an overhead pulley and wench and a dolly, or a few...” She broke off and laughed. “That’s what I keep running into. I start with one and end up with too many.”

With purse in hand Shelly accompanied the two to Halley’s silver Mercedes. They didn’t drive more than ten minutes. Halley parked not far from the Santa Monica pier. At the end of the pier was a Mexican restaurant they headed to.

After ordering Margaret began the conversation with, “What do you usually spend for groceries?”

“Uh. About a hundred or sometimes more for two weeks, but that’s not counting the times I eat out or...”

“It’s okay. I’m not putting any restrictions on you,” Margaret responded to the tension in Shelly’s voice. “I’m just trying to get an idea of what your expenses will be.” She pulled a pad out of her purse. “You have your check book?” Shelly nodded. “That will give you an idea of what you spent when you had a budget. Now that you can eat out more, which most people would rather do when they get a lot of money they’re not used to, you can figure for one person a meal to be from thirty to seventy-five dollars including tip. That’s not at the expensive restaurants and that includes food deliveries, which you need either cash or an active account with the restaurant. Then you figure your clothing will be changing because you’ll be going out to nicer restaurants and you can give in to buying the coat or shoes you once looked at but didn’t buy. Just remember, look at the price first. What a lot of these sales people will do is get you to buy the most expensive article because they get a commission. If asking the price gets you a dirty look...”

“Just walk out. They’re usually out to shame you into buying over priced items,” Halley finished for Margaret. She held her glass of wine up and all three clinked their glasses together.

By the time their meal arrived they were working on redecorating her house with furniture and getting someone over later in the day to look at designing Shelly’s studio.

“I noticed the house has a really screwy design, like some of the rooms were an after thought,” Shelly mentioned.

“Your building used to be a candle making shop in the 70s. The owner and his girlfriend sold them along Venice Beach. The house was demolished long ago. When your father bought the property for an investment the code changed so he couldn’t knock it down and put a four-plex on it as he had planned. So, he rented it out to a handyman. That’s where the loft came from. Your father’s learning curve was a bit slow on real estate investments since he bought what looked good and not what was a good investment, which is why he turned it over to Parkers, our firm.”

“So, if I should choose to knock it down, it could be only two bedrooms?”

“A single family dwelling, limiting the number of rooms. Are you thinking of rebuilding a high rise to get back at the city for undercutting your father’s plan?”

“No,” Shelly laughed. “I like to believe I’m not vindictive, so I practice nonviolent paybacks.”

The two women laughed at her joke.

Shelly was redrawing her workshop design when her doorbell rang. Annoyed at the interruption and sound of the doorbell, she slapped the pencil down on the table.

“Next thing I buy is a “Do Not Disturb” sign with resident has a gun penciled in.”

Peering out the side window she spotted a gray haired black woman dressed in painter’s overalls and a pad tucked under her arm looking at the house’s wall as if there was something interesting to see. Opening the door Shelly studied the woman for a few moments. “Can I help you?”

“Shelly Abbott?”

“Yes.”

“I’m Seandee Randall...the contractor Mrs. McKinney sent over.”

“Randall?”

“You weren’t expecting a woman?”

“I wasn’t expecting a call today.”

“My crew is two blocks from here finishing up on an addition. Is this an inconvenient time?”

“No. The small cottage with the apartment above the garage?”

“That’s the one. A fire in the garage damaged the apartment. Painting is all that’s left and that will be done by this evening.”

The woman glanced around as Shelly led her through her bedroom and into the garage.

“Is this the only way to your studio?” Seandee asked.

“Or the garage door, but I keep the garage door locked.”

“There used to be another exit, right here. I can reopen it. I’ve done more than a dozen art studios around here so I know the building codes and what the inspectors will okay and not okay. Good crossbeams.” She took measurements and made notations as she talked.

“You’ll need some natural lighting in here. I can put a work bench along here and the skylight over here. I understand you do large pieces so you probably like to assemble them under natural light and see it under indoor lights.”

When Seandee finished her inspection she sat with Shelly at the kitchen table and Seandee did a quick sketch what she had in mind. “I know some welders so I have a good idea where the vents and what type of storage you’ll need. Anything special you can think of?”

“This sketch has more than what I thought of.”

“You get the best with Randall Contractors. I can start tomorrow morning, but I’ll need you to unlock the garage door. We start early.”

“What’s early?”

“Six. We can’t start the noisy part until seven but we can get other things started. Did you want this place insulated? It gets chilly in the winter around here.”

“Do what you think is best. How many welders’ studios have you done?”

“None. I’m stopping at Tommy and Lees on my way home for a small project and I’ll take a look at what they have, just to get an idea of what not to do.” She chuckled.

“My big competition did her studio and told me he’ll never do another.”

“Lee Weston?” Shelly asked.

“That’s her. Ever see any of her work?”

Shelly hesitated because they were both students of Michelle Keloviski, and Lee was who Michelle left her for – among others. Before Michelle dropped a steady girlfriend, she would have several other potentials waiting in the wings. Something Shelly wasn’t aware of since she didn’t have much time to visit the popular spots the artist crowd did. Had she done so she could have learned that Michelle was a predator, and she liked the artists that hadn’t yet made it into the recognized talent pool.

Michelle was chatting up a clerk in the artist supply store when they first met. Michelle knew more about the type of paint she was looking for than the store clerk. Shelly was one of Michelle’s spontaneous conquests who lasted longer than an overnighiter. Maybe it was because of her talent that Michelle took her under her wing and gave her some invaluable lessons in addition to a broken heart.

Shelly couldn’t remember opening up her heart that much with anyone and about her art and then finding out that all she was to Michelle was an interesting diversion. Thousands of times Shelly went over their relationship trying to figure out where could she have known that Michelle was just interested in sex. And each time she couldn’t see it, but she was finding it easier to admit that sex was really all they had.

“I can’t stand her work,” Seandee offered. “Tommy, her girlfriend and patron, buys her everything. Tommy doesn’t keep her babes longer than a year, so Lee needs to be looking for another patron. This artsy world is dicey on the relationship thing. Be careful who you shake hands with. So, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Then Seandee was gone.

I swear. Why does Michelle just have to keep cropping up in my life?

Tommy, Tommy, where have I heard of...there was a Tommy at Anthony’s party. She certainly didn’t look attached and I didn’t see Lee. I’ll have to give Anthony a call and see if he knows any gossip...

Oh, no Shelly Lauren Abbott. You are not going to be involving yourself in the underbelly of the art world.

And then Shelly started to laugh hysterically. She was actually going to be part of the art world...the unemployed artist part, but not in the starving category.

Chapter 11

A week and a half later Shelly was working in her new studio, welding another piece to her third mobile. She stepped back and tried to get an idea of how it would look in the light when she remembered she had lights that would give natural sunlight. Turning to switch the lights on she jumped in fright and screamed.

A stranger was standing in the doorway, leaning against it as if he owned it.

She heard Ken’s voice yelling what was wrong from the other room.

“You scared the crap out of me!” she hollered at the stranger. “Get the fuck out of my studio!” Shelly never felt so furious at the smugness of the youth and his apparent disdain of her demands.

“Eric! What the hell happened? Shelly, you okay?” Ken appeared next to the still slouching figure.

“Get out of here!” she yelled again.

“We’re going. We’re going,” Ken insisted, tugging at his friend’s arm.

Furious with her fear and with her reaction to the guy's attitude she stood shaking in the middle of her studio.

"Damn. I need an alarm of some sort to let me know someone's in the house or my room." She walked around in circles to get the shaking fear in the pit of her stomach to stop.

A tentative knock on the studio door had her lifting her head warily. "What?" she demanded.

"Shelly, are you alright? Can I come in?" Ken asked worriedly.

"Are you alone?"

"Eric's gone," Ken's muffled voice returned. By the tone, Shelly realized it was not what Ken wanted.

Shelly didn't realize the door locked when Eric closed it. Opening it she found herself staring at a bearded Ken.

She scrunched up her nose. "Is this the new you?" she asked tentatively.

"Is this the new you? Bitch from hell?" Ken asked irritated.

"Your friends have no business in *my* bedroom and least of all in my studio when I'm working and for that matter never," she returned furious.

"He was just looking around."

"Didn't you tell him you have a roommate and SHE has her own room? It's common courtesy for people not to stick their nose into someone's bedroom without being invited and I didn't invite him. That guy gives me the freaking creeps. He was in *my* studio as if he owned it."

"Well maybe he does. He owns a lot of property."

"Well maybe he doesn't because I know who owns this property and it isn't a HE."

"Why are we yelling at each other for?" Ken demanded angrily, forcing his voice to a moderate volume.

"Ken," she said lower. "He scared the hell out of me. It was like looking at a predator and..."

"Jeeze. I'm sorry, Shelly. He's really weird around women," he admitted suddenly looking embarrassed. "Honest, if I knew you were here I wouldn't have brought him in. I called but you didn't answer. Holymotherofgodandchristalmighty!"

His mouth dropped open as it dawned on him that he was standing in a fully functional art studio. He walked around touching a finished work, then noticing the skylight and the new side door. He rapped his knuckles on the insulated walls.

"Wow. When you get moving you really move. Gal..." He turned to her. "I'm really impressed."

"Uh, Ken, I didn't do this. I hired people."

"Of course, you didn't do it yourself. But you had to have initiated it and finalized it. Is that how you met the owner?"

She cleared her throat nervously. "I own it."

Ken let out a whoop. "Like I said, when you move you really move. Look, I'm going to meet Eric at a local club, I would ask you along so we can celebrate but I know you don't like him..."

Shelly gave him an odd look.

"I'm not getting serious so don't worry. We've already established that in our relationship."

"Ken, that guy's bad news."

"He can be abrasive with some people," Ken admitted.

"Ken, please don't go out with him tonight. I have bad feelings about that guy. Honest. It's his whole attitude."

"He's doesn't like women, Shelly. There're plenty of guys out there that are that way." Ken took a moment when he realized what he said. "I can't believe I just admitted that and still want to go out with him. I think I'm thinking with my nuts." He rubbed his head with his knuckle. "If I had known he disliked women so much I wouldn't have taken the two weeks off with him."

He flipped opened his cell and hit the auto dialer.

"*Hey, big daddy, you shut that bitch up?*" came the voice over the cell loud enough for Shelly to hear.

"That bitch is my sister. Yank yourself." Ken hung up and then deleted the number.

"Where did you meet him?"

"On the beach. He jogs same time every day. I started to see him at the coffee shop I have my breakfast at."

Shelly rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Of course, I knew he was following me," Ken shushed her. "But he had a reason. He liked what he saw."

"I don't think that line works with women anymore."

"That's because most women aren't horn dogs." Shelly sniggered. "Okay, so there are. Anyway, it worked for me. He wanted to come over but I told him I have a roommate. He asked me if I golf and I said yes. He suggested we take two weeks off and stay at a golf course he owns shares in."

"Did he?"

"I don't know, nor do I care. He was paying and I had a good time."

"What if he's the mafia or some gang-type? Gods. He really gave me the creeps." Shelly shuddered.

Ken frowned for a moment. He had never known Shelly to be overly dramatic but then again, she quit a steady job to become a fulltime artist, *and* bought the place they were renting. "Not to worry unnecessarily about foreclosure on this property and the bills you've been running up, but are you going to be able to afford all this?"

"Come-on. Let's go in the kitchen and while we eat some ice cream, your favorite, I have a story to tell you and it falls under the heading of an unexpected windfall."

"I like happy stories." Ken followed her into the kitchen.

By the time Shelly finished her story, Ken was holding his head between two hands, least it grow light and float away.

"I can't believe it. It's better than a Cinderella tale because you don't have to marry a prince and you don't have to experience those horrible step-sisters. Hell, you don't even have to kiss a frog."

"Kissing the frog is in another story. That makes Anthony my half-brother and Gregory, but thank the gods, not his sisters."

“Does this mean I pay you rent?”

“Not unless you want to, but I’d like to make an agreement. You don’t bring your boyfriends home and I won’t my girlfriends.”

“You have a girlfriend too? Who is she and...”

“No,” she said strongly.

“Okay. Can I think about that?” He shrugged his shoulders. “I was putting off looking for a place because I thought you needed me and now...”

“I do need you! You can keep my head grounded in reality. We don’t have to see each other. Well? No pressure.”

He looked uncertain.

“I promise not to become horribly dependent,” Shelly said.

“Let’s see how it works out. I’m not so comfortable being a kept man.”

“Kept man? I’ll do the rent, but buddy, you are doing the groceries. I hate shopping for food.”

“I noticed you just have ice cream in the frig.”

“I go out to eat. I don’t have to wash dishes,” Shelly said.

“I hope not to McDonalds.”

“Naw. Burger King is closer.”

“Shelly!”

“I’m just kidding,” she assured him. “There’re a lot of healthy food places around here and within walking distance.”

“So, tell me about work or about your old job at HI. What happened there?” Ken asked.

“I still don’t know. I’m letting my lawyer handle it.” She gave a laugh. “Can you dig that?”

“Can I *dig* that?” he repeated laughing. “Where did you pick up that term?”

“Margaret. She, Halley and I had lunch together the day I quit and we planned my studio and Halley said she would look into why I was hustled out before I could quit. I just don’t want my name dragged in dirt. I keep picturing myself at an art show and the police dragging me away for something I can’t even imagine Jack trumped up.” She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t even work there and that dirt bag still irritates me. So, tell me about your vacation. You said he paid for everything and you’re telling me you feel uncomfortable about being a kept man? It’s not because I’m a woman and it will sully your reputation, is it?”

“Are you kidding me? Me being kept by a woman and meeting guys at bars would have me so busy with offers I would have to hire a social secretary. Shelly, I don’t mind rooming with you. Honest.”

He cupped his chin with his elbow resting on the table and contemplated something Shelly could not see. “Now that I’m thinking about it, it was really weird. We golfed the moment the sun was up. He said to beat the heat and because he didn’t want to take up reservations of paying customers. We spent more time in bed than sightseeing, so there’s not much to report except we went out for meals.”

“You did practice safe sex...” Shelly waved a finger at him.

“Yes, otherwise I wouldn’t have gone out with him. I buried a lot of friends from AIDS to not know the dangers.”

“So, when do you report for work?”

“Tomorrow. I have to check in with Parker and Associates, too. I haven’t discussed with them what your mother left me.” Ken looked embarrassed. “So, what are you up to now?”

“I have money for furniture. Do you want to go look at furniture with me? We can redecorate this place with something other than someone else’s leftovers.”

“You have funds for a sound system, HDTV 42 inch television? It would fit right on that wall.”

Shelly laughed happily. “Yes. You need a new bed? I’ll get you one.”

“I can buy my own. But that’s a good idea.”

The doorbell interrupted them.

“I sure hope that’s not your friend,” Shelly worried.

“Not unless he drives a Hummer like Anthony Hayes,” Ken observed through the side window. “If he does then he has more vehicles than I have new toothbrushes.”

Shelly opened the door to a well-dressed Anthony. It was not a suit but he could go to an office and not have to return for a tie. “Hi. You’re looking much better. We were just going out shopping for furniture. Want to come along?”

“Sure. I know a few nice places.” He nodded at Ken.

“Are we taking your vehicle or mine?” Ken asked. He already knew Anthony would not leave his Hummer out on the street unattended.

“How about mine?” Anthony offered.

“Did you bring a step ladder for me to get in?” Shelly asked doubtfully as she eyed the distance between the ground and the door.

Ken gave her a boost to the front seat. He sat in the back and watched people below them look enviously at the vehicle. “I’ll bet this drinks more gas than my budget would allow,” he commented.

“It’s not for a person with a concern for gas usage,” Anthony agreed.

Anthony parked in a secure area and the three started to walk down Santa Monica Blvd to window shop. Shelly gave her input but found Ken and Anthony were more suited for figuring out a style and sticking to it. For as wealthy as Anthony seemed to be, he knew when he was paying too much and let the salesperson know in uncertain terms. Once an understanding was made, Shelly’s front room, bedroom and kitchen were to be delivered the next day. It took a longer time to find something for Ken because he was thinking of carrying whatever he picked out up the stairs.

The three then went to dinner with Anthony picking it and informing Shelly the dos and don’ts and why she needed to eat at *Botero’s Restaurant*. Dress was casual, but the prices were not. They ate in the outside patio where the plexi-glass blocked the ocean breeze and the patio warmers kept them comfortable.

Lee and Tommy were sitting at a table on the inside that was loud, like most groups. Shelly would have missed that if Ken had not leaned over and whispered to her. “Hey, does that chick look familiar to you?”

She took a casual glance where he pointed and turned to glare at him. “I could have gone the entire month without being reminded of her.”

“Which her are you speaking of?” Anthony asked.

“Lee...ah, I never did get her last name,” Ken admitted.

“Weston. Oh crap,” Shelly muttered. Tommy had spotted them and was weaving her way towards them with a drink in her hand. “I wish she left her drink behind. This

means she's a lush and is going to say something really stupid and I'm going to have to..."

"Hey there, Tony! I heard you cancelled your last party because you were ill. You could have called me and just moved it over to my place. I have the room." She held onto the back of Anthony's chair and stared openly at Shelly. "Haven't we met before?"

From out of nowhere Lee appeared. Lee was noticeably swaying, latching onto Tommy as an anchor. Shelly noticed Tommy didn't wrap a protective arm around her.

"You haven't met her," Lee insisted. "She's a weekend artist." She arranged one of Tommy's arms around her, spilling what little was in her glass onto the floor and Tommy's shoes. Neither took notice.

Shelly ignored Lee and focused on Tommy, who seemed to be more of a threat. "We may have met at one of Anthony's parties."

"Really," she drawled, also ignoring Lee. "Maybe I'll stop over and see some of your work."

"You already have," Anthony mentioned, deciding that the tension between the three women was not doing his stomach good. "The garden and patio sculptures are her work."

"Oh," Tommy suddenly was very interested. "Weekend artist, you say?" She directed that comment to Shelly, pointedly ignoring everyone but Shelly.

"No. I didn't say that. Your girlfriend did," Shelly returned. She was hoping her tone of disinterest would clue the woman in, but she knew people who drank did so that they could conveniently blunder through most social clues that they were not interested in anyway. It was a readymade excuse for doing what you wanted and blaming it on someone or something else.

The arrival of their food and two waiters had the two women going back to their table before the conversation went further downhill.

"Now I have to eat like her staring at me doesn't bother me," Shelly muttered.

Both men jumped up and offered their seats, however, it was Anthony that had his back to them so she chose his place. "I sure hope in her drunken stupor she gets the message I'm not interested."

"Which one are you speaking of?" Anthony asked.

"Tommy," two voices echoed.

"She's looking for a new conquest. She's trying to fill in the void of lecherous liaisons since Michelle left. She doesn't have Michelle's flair," Anthony commented.

Ken looked up from his prime rib dinner. "How's that?"

"She's too obvious she's on the make for someone else. Michelle just drops her old lover without them even knowing it's over. They operate under two different issues. Michelle's is her fear of loving again. Tommy's is she can't love. She's never been in love and just goes through the motions. Two people with too much money and not enough sense to get counseling." He took a sip of his wine studying Shelly.

"They all can go jump in a cold lake, I'm not interested. My..." she stopped as she watched another of Michelle's students leave the restaurant with a very nicely dressed older woman.

"A lot of artsy people and artsy patrons." Anthony leaned forward and added. "Every one of the artists here, with the exception of you, are here not because they can afford it but because their patron can and he or she is showing them off, so-to-speak."

“So why am I here?” Shelly asked.

Anthony smiled. “Keep an eye on the people you see around here. I’m giving a party in a month. A lot of these artists and their patrons will be there. My party starts the new season for art shows. It’s where patrons swap artists or pick up completely new ones.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nope. I didn’t start my party out with that intention but that’s what it’s turned into. Patrons have influence in the local art galleries. My party is for artists that want their work reviewed. They bring one of their pieces and a portfolio of their work in case someone is interested. Size and weight are taken into account because without the limits I would end up with another two-story dildo like Claude and Betty tried to create in my backyard. Would you like to show some of your work?”

“I don’t want to sell myself...”

“You need the people that own the art galleries to see your work and an agent to take you on as a client. Since you’re already a legit artist and you have your own money, you don’t really need a patron just an agent.”

“Just what do I have to do?” she asked hesitantly.

“Show up, be polite, stay clear headed. The better galleries don’t want to invest in an artist that can’t display some form of self-control and agents would rather have a talented and mentally steady client.”

“What happened to the novelty type of artist? The one that sticks out so she’s easy to sell?”

“There will be time enough for that,” he replied. “The person that just came in is Greg Harrison of Harrison’s Art Gallery. His galleries would be ideal to get shown in and as you can see, everyone knows he’s here. He has galleries in Europe, Canada and on the East and West Coast of America. Michelle Keloviski manages his East Coast galleries. He used to sponsor artists but they became too time consuming. He’s been in Europe for a while.”

Shelly felt a pang seeing Halley with Greg Harrison. The two spotted Anthony and after speaking with the head waiter they came over.

“Hi. The place is full. Do you all mind if we join you?” Halley asked.

“Not at all,” Anthony replied and waved to a nearby waiter to bring two extra chairs. Shelly and Ken – Greg. And you both know Halley.”

“Never had the pleasure,” Ken replied, taking Halley’s hand. “I’ve heard a lot about you, though.”

Shelly’s face turned red. She racked her brain to say something witty and to take the attention off her heated face.

“Must have been something really interesting,” Halley returned in a light tone. Greg directed where to place the chairs. He positioned himself next to Anthony so that he faced the interior of the restaurant. Halley was seated between Ken and Shelly, giving her no view of what the three men could see.

Greg was reading his menu when he said in a low voice to Anthony, “I see the hounds are waiting until I get my dinner ordered. I think I’ve got them finally trained.”

“Hounds?” Shelly asked.

“When Greg makes his restaurant appearances, he’s usually hounded by artists or their managers that want to show in his galleries,” Halley supplied. She turned to the waiter and placed her order.

Greg pointed at the menu and handed it to the waiter before he could extend his hand to take it.

“You’re not eating much,” Shelly observed in a low tone to Halley.

“I’ve already eaten. I’m here as Greg’s bodyguard,” she chuckled.

“That won’t fly,” Anthony humorously pointed out. “They all know you bat for the other team.”

“I was inferring business,” she returned.

“More like I was rescuing her. Gail whatchamacallit is giving her the hungry dog look,” Greg explained to Anthony.

His detached manner and tone of voice only lacked the final show of an effeminate disdainful fling of a wrist. “I noticed they’re offering the same simpy fish selection under a new name. Why on earth doesn’t he just remove cod from the menu?” If he was looking for an answer no one provided one. “His wine list is the only thing he’s keeping up.”

Shelly had a distinct feeling that he was ignoring Ken and her.

“Greg, tell us what’s going on in Europe,” Halley encouraged, “you didn’t get the Web site up so we can’t even take a peek.”

Shelly let herself be distracted with the closeness of Halley. The news that Mrs. Halley McKinney was a lesbian was causing her heart to do extra palpitations. She really needed to rethink her interests about the woman.

“You’ll have to wait.” He looked pleased with himself. He didn’t continue as his gaze was on a waiter who was moving around a distant table. “He’s new,” he commented to no one in particular.

The conversation then went off somewhere else from a comment Anthony made and it got serious. Shelly was thinking of not thinking about Halley.

“Shelly, what do you think?” Ken asked. “Should there be an art festival hosted by the local galleries where any artist can show off their work?”

Shelly looked up startled, played the last sentence back and smiled. “I thought that’s what weekend sidewalk sales were all about.” Her bright smile toward Ken earned her a grin. He had caught her napping.

“Why should we bare the extra burden of weekend artists showing in our galleries?” Greg muttered.

Shelly decided to see if he was really ignoring her. “That’s right. If you’re going to do something that big, you would have to have the art work for at least two weeks showing before you get some kind of return. Besides, if you really want to find new artists, it’s easier to prowl the weekly street fairs.”

Greg said nothing. His eyes were continuously looking over the room.

“Greg, do you have something against me?” Shelly asked curious. “I mean, if you find it difficult to be civil why not just order ‘take out’ and save us who enjoy being social while dinning?”

Greg then did turn to look at her. “You’re at the bottom. When you get higher up the ladder we’ll see how well you do about being ‘civil’ when you just don’t want to.”

Shelly, grinned at the response. She lifted her wine glass and gave him a toast. "You're on."

At this, Greg did smile. He lifted his glass and leaned over to touch her glass. "When is your next showing?" His tone let her know that he didn't think she was a producing artist.

"Next month, at my estate. Clive, Gabby, Jose and Shelly will be the main artists. Friday night the second of the month," Anthony replied.

Greg nodded. "Same time. I like that. I'll be there." He pointed a finger at Shelly, "I'll see you there."

With that said, the conversation at the table lightened up and Halley recounted a story of her first trip up to a mountain cabin she had rented, taking dogs, a teenager, and directions on what to do. The purpose was to bond with her step-daughter and though the experience was disastrous since neither knew anything about camping out. Both had selected food that was microwaveable and the cabin didn't have a microwave. It had a fireplace and outhouse in the back.

Everyone was laughing so hard they had an embarrassed waiter coming over to remind them they were not in a theatre.

They finished their evening at Anthony's place where he not only showed Greg Shelly's work but got into a discussion on the merits of art that is made for outdoor display and indoor. Shelly stayed out of the argument and wandered around Anthony's large sitting room which was packed with art from all over the world.

"You can pick it up and look at it," a voice from behind her informed her. Shelly turned around to see Ken and Halley entering the room.

"Are you sure? What if I lose a bead or something?"

"They're made for dancing in," Shelly informed her. "When I went to Africa a few years ago, I brought that back to Anthony. It's a chief's hat. He refuses to wear it."

"That's right. For all I know, some shaman may have put a spell on it and my head will shrink like that guy in that movie...what's it called?" Anthony asked.

"Beetle Juice," Halley answered.

"That's it. Michael Keaton was the actor. Shelly, are you only producing large pieces?" Anthony asked.

Ken laughed. "You haven't looked in her closet. She used to make miniatures of them for LeeAnn. Maybe we should have picked out a glassed bookcase so you can show them in."

"I'd like to see them before the show," Anthony hinted.

"They're not at all like the final piece, Anthony. They look crude and unfinished."

Ken shook his head. "She's a perfectionist. They're nice. Look, we have to get going. It's late and I'm helping her set up a routine..."

"You took my advice," Anthony said pleased.

"Well, I'll give you that. Running, though I'm still at the walking stage, does give me time to organize and come up with some..." she made a face, "strange ideas for a mobile. Let's give it about six months and see just what strange things I come up with."

"Do you want to grab a ride with us? That way Anthony can get some rest."

Halley gently patted Anthony's arm. "You're sagging."

"If you don't mind," Ken answered for both of them.

Chapter 12

At six in the morning Santa Monica beach had enough runners to call it popular, but to Shelly if she had to dodge more than two people either going faster than her or slower, it was crowded. Or maybe it was because Ken, slowing his usual pace, was grilling her about Halley.

“You know nothing about this babe?” Ken asked unbelieving.

“Mother trusted her. That’s all I need to know,” Shelly huffed from the run.

“I’m not talking about business stuff.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that it’s not a good idea for me to get involved with someone that manages my business?” It suddenly occurred to her that her life was probably an open book to everyone in Parker’s office. Shelly suddenly left the beach walkway for the sand to avoid getting knocked down by anyone behind her.

“I can’t believe it. This woman knows things about me that I may never know.” She stood in the sand with her hands on her hips breathing heavily from her run, feeling uneasy.

Ken finding himself running alone turned around to rejoin her. Studying her with some concern he asked, “Is it a good scare or a bad scare?”

“What do you mean by bad scare?”

“Do you get this horrible feeling that if you see her again you’ll do something incredibly spontaneous that you can’t take back, so since you need to hear her voice you call her with all sorts of business reasons? Or, regardless of that horrible feeling you still want to see her?”

“I want to see her,” Shelly admitted. “But, Ken, it won’t happen. Even I know mixing business with personal stuff is not sensible. What if either of us falls in love and does something really stupid...”

“As in unrequited love? I think the Michelle thing is still on your mind for you to let anyone in that close. But don’t let it prevent you from going out. You’ve never done the bar scene since I’ve known you, so why not go on weekend get-away?” He was grinning when he said this. “You can take me along as your chaperone,” he teased.

“I’m not interested in looking for a girlfriend, bed partner or whatever.”

Ken smirked.

“The woman drives the newest Mercedes model, she dresses nice even when she’s in jeans and T-shirt. She’s got a life style to support and she’s not going to risk it all crossing that line.”

“Jeans? You’ve seen her in jeans and T-shirt?”

“The day I quit HI her and Margaret came over to take me out. I think I mentioned that to you. I hear memory is the second thing to go. They wanted to make sure I wasn’t feeling lost with all this new freedom in my life.”

“I think she likes you. She seemed to at the restaurant and at Anthony’s. I had a chat with her. She does know a lot about you, but that’s because her mother and LeeAnn were friends.”

“LeeAnn and her mother? I don’t remember any of mother’s friends with the last name of Parker. What’s her mother’s first name?”

“I recall her saying it was Mom. Maybe she remarried or kept her maiden name. That isn’t all that new a concept.”

“How far are we running,” she asked suddenly losing resolve.

“Take your shoes and socks off,” he told her. He started to pull his off, tucking the socks into the toes of his shoes.

“Why? What are we going to do?”

“I’m going to show you what man’s best friend has taught me, the joy of running in the waves.”

Holding a shoe in each hand, Ken ran through the soft sand until he got to the water’s edge and waited patiently as Shelly made slower progress in the shifting sand. She arrived panting.

“That’s harder than on the pavement.”

“Sure is. If you don’t have much time but want a good cardiovascular workout, that’s the way to go. Come-on. No time for resting.” And he took off, running along the edge of the waves, sometimes ankle deep in water.

“I think he’s going nuts,” Shelly muttered, but she ran after him. Shelly yelped at the first step into the chilly water. By the time she met up with Ken, he was heading back toward her. By then she was enjoying her run through the waves.

Ken went to bed after his shower while Shelly settled down in her studio. She doodled on a pad and thought of all the reasons why she was not going to show any interest in Halley McKinney.

A knock on the garage door had her looking up. Ken had placed the ‘Daytime Sleeper’ with another sign showing a gun on the door so whoever rang the doorbell was forewarned what they may face.

“Another thing to add, eyes for outside so I can see who’s out there.” Shelly went to her new side door and walked around to the front. Tommy was standing outside about to knock again.

“You want something?” Shelly demanded grumpy.

“Hi,” she seductively drew out. “Am I disturbing you? Don’t answer that. By that look on your face I probably am. How about taking a break and having breakfast with me?”

“I’m busy. You’re also with someone and most importantly, I’m not interested. Good bye.”

“I guess you are. I hear you’re showing at Hayes...”

The familiar feeling she got when she was about to walk into office politics came to her. She held up her hand that she didn’t want to hear anymore and turned around and went back into her garage closing the door firmly behind her. She was rather proud of herself that she didn’t slam the door, but she was rude.

“I have this feeling I’m going to regret that.” She leaned against the door for a few moments and then went back to her work bench and resumed her doodling but this time with a different emotional turmoil.

Her cell phone vibrated on her hip. She had forgotten about her new acquisition which easily clipped onto a hip holster. She carried it everywhere just in case Halley called. Glancing at the number she frowned, not recognizing who it was. Reluctantly she answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Shelly, this is Halley. I have an agreement with your previous employer that they will reverse and remove hear-say from two characters that seemed to be the only

two that have been logging complaints against you in your personnel files. I have also gotten them to send to my office a written apology of the way they had treated you when you were on your way down to quit. I didn't say anything to them about why you were quitting or about your change of fortune. I thought that wasn't necessary. Is that okay?"

"Yes, and wow. I get a letter of apology," she mocked. "I think I may have to send one to Tommy," she confessed.

"Tommy Fernald? Why?"

"Is that of Tommy and Lee? If yes, then that one. She came knocking on my garage door and I gave her a rude Don't bother me I'm working."

"She should be used to that. She dates nothing but artists. She came by this morning?"

"Yes. She started talking about Anthony's announcement of me being one of his pet artists."

"You're the only sister or even sibling that he really likes. Your work is also good, and stands on its own merits. There's going to be a lot of people knocking on your door whether you like it or not."

"Maybe I should find another place to hide out at."

"I'll look around but they're bound to find you unless you hole up in a warehouse with dogs surrounding the building," she warned humorously. "Or you can move into a place as big as Anthony's. If it comes to being unbearable until we find you another place, I'll lend you my four legged kids. Where one goes the other goes, otherwise I would loan you one. I have to warn you though, they need exercise, and that may cut into your creative time."

"I run in the mornings with Ken. There are a lot of people with dogs out. And I do take breaks, so the exercise is no problem. It certainly would keep me to my program of getting out now and then. If I got skates, would one of them pull me?" she asked teasingly.

"Not where you would want to go," Halley returned.

"Well, if I get another unwanted visitor I'll..."

Pounding on the garage door nearly had Shelly dropping the phone.

"What's going on?" Halley demanded, hearing the hollow booms that reverberated on the metal garage door.

"I don't know. I'm going to have to put cameras outside." Shelly walked through her bedroom and into the front room to see what the noise was about.

An irritated Ken was hopping down the stairs with his shorts and t-shirt being pulled into place.

"Damnmotherfuckers can't read a sign!"

Shelly let Ken out the door first and then followed. Lee was standing in front of the locked garage door with a hammer, hitting the aluminum garage door and putting noticeable dents with each bang.

"What are you doing? Can't you read?" Ken shouted furiously.

Lee stared at Ken surprised and then caught sight of Shelly and attempted to pass Ken to get to Shelly, waving the hammer threatening.

"You, bitch!" she spat. *"Yougoddammotherfuckingbitch!"* She wrenched from Ken's grip on her and spun around him, then used the hammer to get past him again.

"Call the police!" Ken yelled when the hammer whizzed by his temple.

Shelly pulled out her cell and fumbled with the phone. “Halley?” she realized she had not hung up.

“What’s going on? I hear yelling.”

“It’s Lee going nuts. Ken has her. I need to call the police before she hurts someone with that hammer.”

“You have a camera on that phone, take pictures,” Halley advised.

After a few minutes of struggling with Lee, Ken had her pinned down and the hammer lying to the side, and all without any blood spilled, though Lee being so skinny was going to have bruises.

“You crazy nut,” fumed Shelly. “What on earth possessed you to attack Ken and I?”

“I’m going to sue you two! Wait until you hear from my lawyer!”

“Ken is a police officer. You attacked him with a hammer. He’s only wearing shorts and a T-shirt. What do you think your lawyer is going to tell you?” Shelly demanded, feeling shaky after the adrenalin rush left. “I don’t even know you nor do I want to. You and that crazy Tommy need to stay in your own backyard.”

“You told her my art was trash and shouldn’t get shown!” Lee accused angrily.

“I told her no such thing! She came banging on the garage door and I told her I was busy. End of conversation.”

“When was that?” Ken asked.

“About an hour after you went to bed,” Shelly informed him softly. “Listen Lee, I’m busy working on my projects. I’m not interested in your girlfriend problems or otherwise. I’m a recluse and I like it that way. What is there not to understand with Leave me alone?”

Halley arrived at the same time as the police. She was dressed in a suit, pumps and just enough makeup for it to look natural. Shelly found her attention divided from the questions from the police to Halley’s presence near her.

Lee was depressed and not speaking to anyone. Halley looked up Tommy’s number and gave her a call to pick Lee up at the police station. By Halley’s tone it was a voice machine she left the message with.

“Do you normally attract this much trouble?” Halley asked after the police carted Lee off.

“Not when she lived with LeeAnn,” Ken said.

Shelly’s pursed lips told Ken she was not in the mood for teasing, and thinking about that decided he needed to get some sleep before he reported to work. “I’ll let you two untangle this mess. I’m going back to bed. Night, ladies.”

Shelly glanced at Halley and found herself being studied. Her face reddened.

“Halley, I appreciate you rushing out here...”

“I actually was in the neighborhood on business,” she interrupted. “Since I’m here, can I see your small-scale samples?”

Shelly brightened at that. “Sure. Umm, I haven’t made my bed...”

“Don’t worry about the small things, though, your new furniture should be arriving about one so you may want to think about unmaking the bed so they can clear it away. What are you going to do with your old furniture?” she asked as they passed by it.

“Donate it. Good Will is coming by at three to pick it up and the rest of my furniture. I’ll have to wake Ken up to move in his new bed because there’s no way I’m carrying his furniture up those stairs.”

“You hire people for that,” Halley told her. “If you tip the guys that are delivering the furniture they’ll move the same piece of furniture to any corner until you decide where you want it.”

“Right. I almost forgot I can afford to do that.” She opened up a long metal cabinet on the opposite side of her work bench. Four shelves were stacked with small mobiles. Some never made it to larger projects.

“Ooh, this is nice. Who did you sell the large version to?” Halley asked.

Shelly leaned forward and flicked the moveable part. It became unbalanced and fell over, knocking others near it down.

“I still like it. Like an unbalanced life. It looks fine until something is moved and then you see the flaw in the design. Anthony will love these. Have you ever thought of selling them?” Halley asked.

“No. Actually, they were mothers.” Shelly could feel her eyes getting ready to tear. This was not how she wanted to look around Halley. “She liked everything I did and had names for them. She wrote the names on the bottom.”

Halley turned the unbalanced one over. *Pride*.

“So who were you thinking of when you did this?” Halley asked as she set *Pride* down.

“I don’t remember. But my titles were not quite as poetic as mothers.”

“Anthony said you have a portfolio of your works. Don’t forget to bring them to his art show. For all Greg’s arrogance and poking fun at the artists and their backers, he’s been in the business since he was a kid. His mother worked in a gallery. He’s been all things to artists and a lot of the time they’ve been real flaky with him. Not dependable and not reliable in the long-term investment field.”

“Could I open up my own gallery?”

“You can. Arrange a meeting with Paula Solar in our office, and she’ll go over the pros and cons of doing so, and help you with anything you need in that aspect.”

Shelly nodded, watching Halley as she talked.

“This place really looks nice,” Halley said. Her eyes rested briefly on Shelly, then moved back to looking over the studio.

Shelly felt her face redden, aware that Halley knew she was attracted to her. She was happy nothing was said about it and that Halley kept their relationship friendly but professional. Her crash and burn with Michelle Keloviski was enough to warn her that recognizing her emotional dependency on lovers before it was too late, wasn’t a skill she was good in.

“It came out really good. I’ve called Seandee a few times and asked her about some changes and she’s really clever with taking what I want to do and making it solid.”

“You know, since you’re one of the favored artists, you’re not limited to one art piece. I hope you intend on bringing these four.”

Shelly looked at the finished pieces she was referring to. “I don’t know. That one in the corner is my retaliation about my response to the second day of my running on the beach. I was so sore I was moving like an old woman.”

“That’s what that is!” Halley laughed. She glanced at her watch. “I have a parent-teacher conference to get to,” she apologized. “One of these days we’re going to have to have another one of those adviser’s conference, Margaret, myself and you.”

“That was a nice lunch. I want to thank you all for stopping by. I was down in the dumps.”

Shelly walked Halley out to the front door and waited until she drove off.

“You’re going to have to do something about her.” Ken was leaning over the loft railing.

“You need to be sleeping, not shooting arrows our way, Mr. Eros,” she mocked. “The new furniture will be delivered later today.” Shelly headed back to her bedroom and began to get the bed ready to be removed.

Chapter 13

Shelly was edgy and nearly snapping at the movers as they tipped one of her pieces they were moving from the van onto a dolly to roll each one to its designated place for the show. To avoid favoritism, placement was based on a lottery system. She was number twenty-two and was placed near the fountain. Since she had seven of her works already placed around Anthony’s yard as permanent, she felt overrepresented.

Greg was in a heated discussion with a group of other gallery owners. Anthony had informed her it was the same discussion the group had whenever they met – whether Edvard Munch saw a real extraterrestrial and pained it in the scream or was just having a mental breakdown.

With a bottle of water Shelly wandered up and down the rows of art. Everyone attending was given a bid card and she made notations, thinking it would be nice to have original art by others on her walls.

“Hey, Shelly,” Ken greeted her. He was balancing a bottle of beer and a sandwich in one hand and a plate of food in the other. “Take the plate.”

Shelly did as she was told and watched him take a long drink of his beer.

“So, what did you want me to do with this plate of food?”

“Eat. You didn’t eat breakfast and you missed lunch.”

She looked over the plate with a mixture of something and fruit. “What is this stuff?”

“Vegetarian.”

She nibbled on the edge and decided it wasn’t bad. “So, have you looked at some of this stuff?”

“Yes, and talk about trying to be one of a kind,” he snorted softly. “Some of this stuff looks like it was dragged out of someone’s trash.”

Shelly laughed. “Well, mine was. Did you forget that you supplied some of the trash?”

“Yes, that’s right. What kind of status does that give me?”

“Hi, you two. Mind if Lauren and I join you?”

Shelly started to turn to the voice, already feeling disappointed at hearing she was not alone. Shelly's eyes fell on a teenager. She was dark-haired, tanned from an active outdoor life and had an expression on her face that she didn't want to be here.

Shelly promptly stuck out her hand to the young woman. "I'm Shelly, one of the people that is here to make sure you aren't bored. Want to see what I mean?"

"You have my curiosity," Halley told her. "Lauren, this guy is Ken, Ken – Lauren my daughter when she's in a good mood and her step-mom when I'm in the dog house."

Ken smiled and held his hand out to Lauren. "My parents would have me spend most of my teen years in the dog house if we had one."

"That's because he was a prankster when he was young," Shelly said. "He's taken up another hobby since he grew up."

"Not a model teenager?" Halley said. "One moment nice and the next wacky."

"Mom, you said it yourself, it's the hormones," Lauren returned.

"I went for summers to my aunt and uncle's that had a dude ranch. Their best customers were Japanese businessmen that wanted to rough it. They saw Urban Cowboy," Ken said.

Shelly led them to her latest sculpture. It was interactive with a water reservoir that would squirt water at whoever touched tempting parts of the mobile. Lauren and Halley laughed when Lauren was the one that got hit with the first squirt.

"How does it work?" Lauren peered at the moving parts that were part of the visual structure, spray painted in bright colors.

"I buy these gizmos from a retired guy that loves to tinker. It's fun."

"You don't know what it's going to look like until you're finished!" a triumphant Lauren declared.

"Not always. I have an idea of what I want. Sometimes, even when I have a design drawn, by the time I'm finished it looks different."

"See?" Lauren turned to Halley. "Art classes are a waste of time."

"I didn't say that," Shelly said.

"You need to watch Shelly at work," Ken said. "It's like this; she has friends that collect interesting metal things for her. She scatters them out on the garage floor and arranges them this way and that and then again, and again, and pretty soon, she has what she likes and does a sketch, then moves the pieces she won't use out of sight and begins her work. Sometimes she cuts or bends the pieces, spray paints them or bangs on them. Great place for her to be when she gets in one of those 'funks'," he said.

Shelly could see Lauren perk up at Ken's offer and felt guilty she didn't make the offer herself. "Maybe one of these weekends you can spend the day. It takes about a full day to get the design set. In the beginning, I used to make small scales but now, there's no reason to."

"Could I, mom?"

"Sure. What weekend do you have in mind?"

"The one you're taking off to the woods," Lauren said, giving her a dramatic baleful eyes look.

"That's next weekend. Don't you want to chaperone me? Is that too early?"

Halley asked Shelly.

Shelly had to blink a few times, realizing what she had offered. "Uh, no, that's fine."

“I’ll let grandpa know, so he won’t think you’ve run off to get married,” Halley said.

“Jack and I broke up, so you don’t have to keep calling me with ‘where are you’,” Lauren informed Halley in a drroll tone.

Halley didn’t answer but instead turned her back to the others. “I think we need to continue looking around that way.”

Lauren glanced in the direction her mother had been facing and saw Lee and Tommy. Her face wrinkled up into a frown.

“Don’t say it,” Halley told her daughter softly.

“So, what do you do in the woods,” Shelly asked and then laughed embarrassed. “What I meant is...”

“I take it, you don’t go camping or for hikes?”

“Nope. Not even Ken does. Do you?” Shelly turned to look at Ken who was watching someone with interest. “Hey, you don’t have to hang here. You can mingle.”

“If you don’t mind. I see someone I know.” Ken nodded to Lauren and Halley and threaded his way across the grass, art and people to Eric.

“That guys gives me the creeps,” Shelly muttered and looked away.

“Eric Kingsman. The only thing nice about him is, he let’s you know the moment he opens his mouth what he is,” Halley said.

“Do you everyone around here?” Shelly asked.

Lauren took a breath as if she was going to say something when Halley put a hand over her mouth.

“Not to be rude to you, Lauren, but whatever you are going to say I’m going to agree with you, which means that I will be breaking grandfather’s golden rule of business. I don’t want to do that since you and I have gotten used to living so well.”

Lauren pulled Halley’s hand from her mouth. “All right. But when we’re alone in the car, I get to say it,” she bargained.

Halley nodded. “Okay. Just keep it to a short sentence, and you have a deal.”

“Can I go over there?” Lauren pointed to a gathering of teens sitting around the pool.

“Sure, as long as you remember we’re leaving in an hour and a half.” Halley tapped the crystal of her watch.

“Okay.” Lauren waved at Shelly and started over to the pool.

“More than five or six teens in a group, isn’t that considered dangerous?”

“I’ll let Anthony’s monitors worry about it. It’s what they’re paid for.”

“So, you come to all his parties?”

“Not all, only the ones that he has monitors. They’re here more for his protection than his guests. We don’t want any incidents that will draw unfavorable news attention to the Hayes.”

“Like drug paraphernalia lying about.”

“Exactly.”

“So, you’re here for business?” Shelly glanced at Halley and found her smiling at her. “What?”

“So, what do plan on showing Lauren on Saturday? As her guardian, I need to be assured you won’t be teaching her any obsessive habits, like working all day without a lunch break.”

“I’ll set the alarm for lunch time. It may be boring for her and she’ll want to leave an hour later. However, I have a friend at the junkyard that picks out some interesting pieces for me and I told her I would be by Saturday morning to see what she has. So, if she’s at my place by seven in the morning, dressed in her grubbiest she can come with me. Otherwise, I’ll give her a call when I get back.”

“I think she’ll like to see where you get your parts.” She glanced at the pool and could see Lauren watching them.

Shelly lifted her hand and waved at her. It was just a wave of acknowledgement but Lauren used it to leave the group.

“Something wrong, hon?” Halley asked softly when she joined them.

“Naw. They’re boring.”

“On Saturday, I’ll be leaving my house at seven to take a trip to the junkyard. You want to come along?” Shelly asked.

“Yeah, sure. Junkyard, huh?”

“I have a friend that keeps an eye out for interesting stuff. Wear clothes you don’t care about and are comfortable. Not too tight and not too loose. Ugly but comfortable shoes and gloves.”

“If mom hasn’t thrown them out,” Lauren said.

“I throw out what you don’t wear to make room for what you buy,” Halley corrected. “We live within the limits of our closet space.”

Lauren was smiling as the three walked toward the food laden table. Greg stopped by and smiled at Shelly. “You have winners. Do you think you can get a dozen pieces together? Something like that one with the water?”

“Not like it. I don’t like my art to seem like I’m mass producing, or doing variations of the same.”

“Okay. A dozen in two months? Is that a rush?”

“No.”

He glanced at Halley. “This is kinda late for you. I thought you would be gone by now.”

“We started out late. I had a flat tire.”

“Think Carl is going to hang onto his gallery?” Greg asked Halley.

Halley shrugged her shoulders. “He’s not a good gamble, Greg. Going to New York to start over is just running away and taking your troubles to a new neighborhood.”

Greg sighed. “I wish he would settle down and go back to painting.”

“I don’t think what you want him to do is what he wants to do.”

“He’s an artist.”

“Not right now.”

Greg turned away. He went to an artist that was nervously standing near his work with a photo album tucked under his arm.

“Who’s Carl? Or should I not ask?”

Lauren snorted. “Boy, you must have been out of town.”

“Carl is Greg’s younger brother. He had the makings of an artist since he was a kid. Through high school he had a good mentor, then he graduated and got involved in drugs.”

“Are they close?”

“No. They always fought, but for the sake of their mother, Jane, Greg is keeping tabs on Carl until he’s ready to make contact with the family. Carl unfortunately feels it’s his family’s expectations on him that got him involved with drugs so he doesn’t want to talk to anyone in the family.”

“How do you know where he is?”

“His gallery is the one you’re a silent partner to. It’s a ten-year contract, which he intends to buy your shares. He’s been paying back on time but he doesn’t do well under pressure and I’m getting the feeling he’ll choke on the last payment and go on a drug binge.”

“So, mother knew him?”

“She was his godmother.”

“Oh.”

“Your mother knew a lot of artists. She told me that if she had introduced you to some of the artists Jane brought home while you were young, you would not have bloomed in your own direction.”

Shelly stared at the art work that surrounded them with pursed lips. It was amazing how much she had thought she knew about her mother and didn’t. She had always been a loner, preferring her own company, while her mother went out often. Her mother never pressured her to be different.

“How long have you known my mother?”

“All my life. Your mother and father’s legal and financial business have been handled by grandfather, father and when I was able, myself. Father recommended Margaret to your mother when she wanted to keep her investments intact for you, separate from her medical bills.”

“I don’t understand. She had the money. Why didn’t she just pay them off?”

“Because her insurance would have not paid most of the charges and her doctors would have charged her for things she didn’t need. She also didn’t want you to be tempted to keep her alive longer. She was a firm believer that if it’s time to go, it’s time to go.”

“They wanted to perform a colostomy on her. I took the day off to make sure they understood that that was exactly what she didn’t want.” Shelly’s voice broke.

“Just what she suspected they would start doing if they knew she had money.”

“How long do I have to stay at one of these things?” Shelly asked as she spotted Lee looking around. They had avoided Tommy and Lee by standing behind art or people but the law of averages would eventually catch up with them.

“You’ve been here long enough, made the right connections, I think you can leave now with a word to Anthony.”

“Since Ken has me getting up early to run, eleven o’clock is beyond my bed time.”

“For Lauren too.”

Chapter 14

Ken was spending the night with someone he had met at Anthony's party and it wasn't Eric so Shelly didn't worry about the noise she made while making coffee, tearing open toaster pop-ups, and rummaging around in the closet looking around for clean jeans.

"Must be laundry day," she muttered to herself. "I'm going to have to mark on my calendar once a week, laundry." This was really embarrassing that if she had so much money she should not be running out of clean jeans.

"Ah," she cried victoriously. They were old and were slated for her rag pile, but they were clean, and the rips were not in embarrassingly private places. The doorbell rang as she hopped into the pant legs. "Be right there," she shouted.

Closing her bedroom door behind her she hurried to the front door, remembering to see who was knocking first.

Lauren. Pulling open the front door Shelly could see Halley in a SUV and two dogs hanging out the back window.

"Good morning. Right on time. Is she going up to the mountains alone?" Shelly waved at Halley who waved back, then drove off.

"No. There's a group of them that go up at this time. All single lesbian parents," Lauren informed her in a droll voice.

"Ah. Probably talk a lot about embarrassing things, like the sins of a teen, which you don't want to hear about," Shelly guessed.

"It's the same thing every year. Mom is so bored out of her wits. They use our cabin so mom feels she has to go."

Shelly grabbed her keys and wallet and led the way to her battered truck.

"This yours?"

"My one and only. Think I should buy something else?"

Lauren shrugged her shoulders. "If you need one. For going to a junkyard, it looks okay. So how do you get your ideas?"

"My life. If it sucks, I doodle something about that. Then I look at what I have in way of supplies, lay out stuff on the floor and then redraw another sketch. When I lived with my mother I would make a miniature one first. Just to see if it would work. It's cheaper and easier to work on them when the piece is that small."

"Can I weld something?"

"Sure. Have you ever worked with welder's tools?"

"Lee let me do a few things but that was when she thought..." Lauren paused.

Shelly let the silence lengthen into a dropped conversation.

"Ah, yes. They use you for as long as you can get something for them. Been there. I was driving my mother crazy with my belly aching about feeling used until she pointed out that pointing fingers at others only means three are pointing back at me." Shelly smiled at the memory of her mother. "I was beside myself that she was implying that I used people. After slamming my bedroom door and sulking for I don't know how long, I began to draw a mobile that would represent this unpleasant experience. By the time I was finished making the pieces, that's two weeks, I knew she was right. Now, every time I meet someone, I find myself thinking, what can this person do for me. It's like I've got such a guilty conscience that my dark side will use other people, that it's now always foremost in my mind." She shook her head in memory of what Anthony had told her about the Hayes dark side.

"If you're a Lesbian, why do you have a boy roommate?" Lauren suddenly asked.

The question was so unexpected Shelly's nearly missed the red light.

"Ken's a friend. At one time I likened him to my adopted brother but now that I know I have brothers, I think a best friend is better. He looks out for me to make sure I don't obsess or forget important things while I work on my art."

"What does he get out of it?"

"You think I'm using him? He gets free rent, utilities, a place on the beach and a friend that he can depend on."

"Oh. Usually people with money always have free loaders. A polite word Grandpa uses is leeches."

"Leeches do have medical uses, but that's not Ken. He has a full-time job and buys the groceries. And most importantly, he chaperones me at these art shows."

"I've never been at a junkyard," Lauren said as Shelly parked.

"These places are dirty and so are a lot of the people that come here." She pulled out two pairs of gloves, handing one to Lauren.

"Who owns this place?"

"Lester Fishman and his daughters. It was Fishman and sons but Lester who inherited it from his father only had girls, bless his heart. That man was a father to dozens of foster girls. His wife and him were really good people. He died some years back. Sarina, Stacy and one of the foster girls, Kelly, stayed to help Connie run the place. Since then, Connie remarried and her present husband travels a lot for his business and Connie goes with him. She says it keeps him honest."

"You have a more interesting life than most of mother's artist friends," Lauren said.

Shelly was led the way through parked cars and loitering men.

Lauren paused to speak to one of the men that had made a comment as they were passing. Whatever it was had his friends laughing at him.

"Hey, Stacy."

A large woman sitting at the computer looked up. She was tapping on a filthy plastic cover over the keys.

"Hi, Shelly. Got a new student?" She rose from her chair and unattached a key that was hanging from the wall. She handed the key to Shelly.

"She's interested in junkyard art." She took the keys and went around to unlocked a metal gate. Shelly walked into the side door into the office, handing Stacy the key ring back.

"Stacy this is Lauren. Lauren, this is Stacy. Should you want to become a welder and want the unusual and affordable pieces, this is the place to come. Fishman's Salvage has good prices and Stacy has a good eye. You just tell her what you're looking for and she has it or will find it."

Stacy nodded. "Howdy, Lauren. We sure do. I'm busy right now so you'll have to pick up the stuff yourself. It's in the usual place." The phone rang and Stacy waved at the two, returning back to her work.

Lauren trotted beside Shelly who was walking fast.

"See that dolly? Can you grab it?"

Lauren hurried over to the dolly and was about to grab it when she noticed how dirty the handle was.

"Put the gloves on," Shelly reminded.

“Oh, right.”

Shelly went through the box of metal Stacy had set aside for her. Lauren poked at the ones she had cast aside.

“You don’t think this is interesting?” Lauren asked.

“If you want to work with it, take it. We’ll ask Stacy how much she wants for it and see if you’re still interested.”

“Okay.” Lauren’s voice lifted with excitement.

Once they had paid Stacey for the parts and they were locked in the back of the truck shell the two were back on the road happily discussing what Lauren was going to do with her parts.

“I really liked the way you make your art move and do things. It’s just not there for people to come by and stare and then move on.”

“I get the mechanism that moves the parts from a guy called Dr. Tinker. He takes broken mechanisms in cast off toys or other things, fixes them and turns them into all sorts of things.”

“Look at the fire!” Lauren burst out.

For a moment Shelly feared it was her place. Why she thought that she attributed to her sometimes bleak outlook on life. These days she had no excuse.

The police blocked off the one way streets so Shelly had to park a good hike from her residence. She pulled out her cell and called Ken.

“Hi, this is Shelly. When you get a chance, can you call me? There’s a fire near our place and I was wondering if you know whose place it is. There’s a police barricade so I can’t get close to see. Bye.” She folded up her cell.

“Let’s go over there,” Lauren pointed to a sidewalk that would take them to the beach.

“Good idea.”

The beach was just as crowded as the two made their way toward Shelly’s place.

“Is it near your place?” Lauren asked, glancing at the worried face of her new friend.

“It looks like it. The buildings are so close together if one catches the rest will.”

“Grandfather was saying most of the old houses in Venice are held together by the gallons of paint used over the years to paint them.”

“In one of the coffee shops I overheard one person that was for keeping the old homes and renovating them and the other said they couldn’t be renovated due to the weather and termite damage. A fire would end that debate.”

“Grandfather’s beach house was damaged by termites and old age. He had it rebuilt with steel beams. No termites in his house now.”

They treaded their way through the crowd.

“Excuse me officer, can you tell me which residence is on fire?” Shelly pulled out her license to show him that she had a valid reason for asking.

He didn’t bother looking at her license. “Four down, three to go. The fire chief said they won’t be able to save them. His crew is just making sure the surrounding homes aren’t going to catch.” With that he moved off to answer someone else’s question.

Shelly’s cell rang at that moment. Pulling it out, she followed behind Lauren as she headed to another part of the blockade.

“Hello? Hello? Is anyone there?” She glanced at her caller ID and found it was blocked. “Great, whoever it is doesn’t want a call back.” She hung up and slipped the phone in her hip holder.

Lauren found a better location where they could see where the fire was.

“Pretty close,” Lauren whispered.

“One more house and mine would have been next. I hope the place is water sealed.” Shelly was looking around the police officers’ faces, hoping to see someone she knew. “Officer Browder,” she called.

Browder looked toward where Shelly was. She nodded to Shelly she knew her and said something to her companion. Both of them headed to her with Browder lifting the tape for the two to go under.

“The detectives would like to talk to you,” Browder told her. “You may need a lawyer, Shelly. I let Ken know. Did he get in touch with you?”

“No. We were at the salvage yard picking up supplies.”

“Yeah?” she asked interested. Whatever conversation she was about to have was changed to a businesslike introduction to two detectives that Shelly didn’t know.

“Shelly Abbott, this is Detectives Sasaki and Sherwood.” She nodded to the group and left to go back to her assigned spot.

Sasaki wore a scowl that looked like the lines were permanent on her face. “You live in that house?” Her thumb jabbed in the direction of Shelly’s house.

Since she was holding Shelly’s driver’s license that had the address on it, it seemed redundant but Shelly answered anyway. “Yes.”

“You have insurance you intend on collecting?” Sherwood asked.

Shelly laughed in disbelief. “I just spent a lot of money on fixing up my studio, so yes, I do have insurance. I understand from Officer Browder that you wanted to speak to me.”

“Where were you for the last two hours?”

“At the salvage yard,” Lauren piped up.

“I didn’t ask you. Who are you?” Sherwood asked Lauren.

“Lauren McKinney and I was with her at the salvage yard.”

“Aren’t you robbing the cradle?” Sasaki snidely asked Shelly.

“What?” Shelly demanded in disbelief. “Where do you get off with this attitude of insinuating things? Do you realize that insinuating it in front of a minor is also considered child abuse?”

“You want to go down to our office and answer some questions?” Sherwood asked.

“Yes. Along with my attorney and your supervisor. You have some explaining to do.”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Matt’s voice purred behind Shelly.

Shelly turned to Matt. “Matt, one of these clowns inferred I was robbing the cradle with Lauren.”

“What’s wrong with you guys?” Matt demanded in a low voice. “Lauren’s Hutch’s niece.”

The two looked at each other and then back at Shelly. “We got a tip that she burned down another artist’s studio in a jealous fit.”

“Jealous of what?” three voices asked.

“Well, we don’t really know.”

“That’s why we need to question her. We’re going to take her back to the office.”

“Are going to arrest us?” Lauren asked. “If you are, I’m calling my grandpa.”

“Not unless Shelly admits to torching a block.”

“We just got back from the Fishman’s Salvage Yard. When was I supposed to have time to do that?” Shelly demanded.

“We’ll ask the questions. And the kid doesn’t have to come.” Sherwood started to his car.

“Not likely,” Shelly told them. “Number one, she’s a minor and I’m responsible for her today. Number two, she’s my witness that we were at the yard.”

She pulled out her cell as it vibrated on her hip. “Hello?... We just got here. The detectives seem to think I have something to do with the fire.... No, not my studio. It looks like it started in someone else’s garage. I’ll need a lawyer.... No, Matt’s here.... Sure. Lauren, it’s your mother.” She handed the cell phone to her. “How does that women up in the wilderness know what’s going on here? It’s amazing that everyone hears about this fire before Lauren and I.”

“You parked somewhere around here?” Sherwood asked.

“About ten blocks away.”

“You said you were picking up parts. I’ll want to see these parts. Are they in your car?”

“It’s a truck and they’re in the bed.”

“May I have the keys?” Sasaki asked.

Shelly handed them to Sasaki.

“I’m going too,” Matt informed the two detectives.

“Don’t think so. This is out of your jurisdiction, Redfield.”

“The kid doesn’t need to come along. You can watch her until her mother picks her up,” Sherwood informed him.

Matt gave him a funny look. “Come on, Lauren. We’ll meet you two characters...where did you say you’re taking her?”

Sherwood hesitated.

“I smell a skunk here.” Shelly could feel herself getting angry at the undercurrent of deception she was feeling about this. “I’m not going anywhere unless I have my lawyer with me and if you arrest me, you charge me and tell my friends just where you’re taking me, and how long it will take me to get there.”

Sherwood snorted in disgust. “For a person who claims she doesn’t know anything about this fire, you’re acting awfully guilty.”

“Why are you being evasive that I feel I have to defend myself?” Shelly returned. Her mother always told her that when she got her back up about something she went horns first into it.

“Lauren, did Shelly say something to those two to get them ticked off with her?” Matt asked softly.

“They were already that way.” She pointed at him. “You name dropper. You don’t know my uncle.”

“Who?”

She shook her head. “How come adults get away with all that stuff my mom tells me not to do. Is she going to be all right with them?”

“I don’t know. I’d like to know more about the fire. Come on. We’re going to mingle and chat with the neighbors,” Matt said.

Chapter 15

Shelly was standing with a uniformed officer on the curb while the two detectives went through her truck and pulled out everything they could find. On TV programs, the police never put back together what they tear apart. Looking at the positive side to this, she wasn’t in handcuffs and she wasn’t bent over the hood of her car.

A car pulled alongside of them. “Are you Ms. Shelly Abbott?”

“Yes,” she answered automatically.

“Who’s asking,” demanded Sasaki.

“Her lawyer and you can stop tearing her vehicle apart. In fact, you can put everything back and neatly. You don’t have a warrant or a legal reason to harass my client.” The older man got out of the back seat and his driver drove off. Shelly guessed it was so a cranky cop didn’t give him a ticket for double parking.

“My name is Lawrence Walker. How do you do Ms. Abbott?”

“Better now. They’re operating under the misconception that I started the fire.”

“Ah, no detective. I did say that you will have to return the vehicle to better condition than that.”

The two detectives glared at Shelly but she ignored them. “Do you know what’s going on?” she asked her lawyer.

“Not yet. But I have a very good team of investigators. They’re on the job now. Would you like a ride somewhere?”

“Home, if I can get there.”

“Why don’t you give me a ride there when your vehicle is ready to drive? My driver should be waiting for us there.” He pulled out his phone and after a brief conversation closed it and waited for the police.

..*

By the time Shelly and her lawyer, compliments of the Halley’s father, arrived, Ken, Matt, Lauren, John Parker, and Anthony were there. The crime scene tape stopped at one house before hers.

Shelly walked through the front door with Mr. Walker.

“Are you all right?” everyone asked.

“How are you, John? I got there just in the nick of time,” Walker informed him. “Do you have any more of that coffee for me to get a cup?”

“We have plenty. How do you take it?” Ken jumped up. He was wearing the same clothes as last night but looked like he had a recent shower.

“Walker and I will take care of this situation,” John Parker informed Shelly. “If you run into any problem, you have my number?” Shelly nodded. Parker handed her another card with Walker’s number. “Don’t hesitate to call if you think there’s going to be trouble. Right now, until we find out what’s behind the fire I want to caution you about who you meet and who you talk to, and what you say.”

Ken handed Walker a cup of coffee.

“Now, what I need from you is your cell phone number and a daily schedule. You can do it now or fax it to my office, title it and...” he paused when Shelly started to laugh.

“We don’t have a fax. I just got her into the Internet age,” Ken said.

“I know about PCs,” Shelly said indignantly. “I just don’t spend much time on them these days.” She sighed, thinking of how life was just as complicated as it was before she had money, only with different things.

“I suggest you find a more secure place to live,” John Parker told her.

“Why?” Then she looked embarrassed. “Okay, dumb question. But...it’s near the beach. I’ve never been this close to the beach except in my dreams.”

“I think someone’s really crazy to set those houses on fire,” Lauren told everyone. John nodded placing a hand on his granddaughter’s shoulder. “It is honey, but we don’t know for sure if that’s what this really is. People say all sorts of things and we need to go through it all.” John turned to Matt. “So what did you find out from the neighbors?”

“They heard two people arguing about drugs. Shelly’s name was mentioned and they heard a bang. The fire broke out after that.”

“I’m not involved with drugs and as far as I know, I don’t know anyone that’s into drugs.”

“She leads a very sheltered life,” Ken agreed.

Matt let out a big laugh. “She never goes out. Wait, I take that back. Ken brings her to police functions.”

“I’d like to go over some property with you as prospective alternatives to here, and family business. Would tomorrow be okay? In the afternoon?”

“It’s Sunday,” Matt said.

John and Walker looked at him in surprise.

“Family business is every day,” Anthony said. “Is 2PM okay?”

The two men nodded. “At my office,” John said. “We’ll have more information on what’s going on with this fire.”

Walker set his empty cup down and nodded to the others.

“I’m leaving too, can you two wait up?” Anthony turned to Shelly as if expecting the two men to wait. “I’ll pick you up for lunch about twelve tomorrow. Is that too early?”

“Fine. Am I supposed to wear anything special?”

“We’ll eat at *LaBards*. It’s a small place but they have good food and great coffee. Lauren, do you want to go now or wait?”

“I guess all this kind of ruined our day,” Lauren said sadly.

“Another weekend?” Shelly suggested.

“Sure!” She brightened up.

“Okay, check with your mother what would be a good time for our next project. I’m sorry we didn’t get very far today.”

“I’ve never been to a junkyard before. Wait until I tell my friends.”

“Won’t they consider that below them?”

“No way. This is for real art.”

“I’ll put your stuff in my workshop ready for you.”

When Lauren and Anthony drove off Matt glared at Shelly.

“What?” she asked.

“Just what is family business about?” Matt demanded. “You get money and a new family and you suddenly don’t know us?”

“If they don’t want to discuss their business in front of you, it’s their business and their right,” Shelly said.

“All right, stop it both of you!” Ken let out an explosive breath. “Geeze. Matt, go take a walk. You’re out of line here.”

“Fuck you, Ken. Fuck the two of you.” He turned and slammed the door behind him.

“What’s going on with him?” Shelly’s hands were shaking from Matt’s anger.

Ken shook his head that he didn’t know, but he really did. Matt was going to be a problem.

“Shelly, you don’t think these people are setting you up, do you?”

“I don’t know, Ken. What I do know is I don’t want to work. I just want to go to bed and sleep this all off.”

“Come here, you look like you need a hug.”

Shelly wrapped her arms around Ken and cried for a few minutes.

“Things are changing around me, Ken, and I don’t know what’s safe anymore.”

“Safe for you is working on a sculpture, but for inspiration you need to be a part of the real world.”

She sniffed, “I want my mommy.”

“I miss her too. I enjoyed our conversations while gardening or fixing dinner.”

“Why has Matt changed so much?” She leaned back and looked up at Ken.

“He hasn’t changed, Shelly. You just got a chance to see another side of him.”

“He was really scary there. Like that friend you spent the week with. How come I never felt that before?”

“Circumstances have changed.”

“Ken, he’s just an acquaintance. He was only around when you were, in fact, when mom was dying, he never came around.”

Ken fiddled with his empty coffee cup.

“Are you two close?”

“No. In fact, in the beginning, he invited himself along when I would come over to help LeeAnn with some of her home projects. As you can tell by her nick name of him, she wasn’t too fond of him. She tolerated him because he helped out. Since you’ve been moving around in higher circles, I’ve been overhearing some comments that were supposed to have come from him. I think he knew something about your mother’s past.”

“What has that to do with me?”

“How fast did he get here?”

“I didn’t call him. I just left a message with you. Officer Browder said she called you too. How many people have your number? Is she a sister?”

“No, she’s not gay. I helped her out with a family problem.”

“Does she know you’re gay?”

“Yes, so is her little brother. Shelly, do you trust me?”

“With my life. Why?”

“Let me take care of Matt, okay? Don’t go anywhere with him alone and don’t trust him.”

“I don’t trust him nor care to be around him, so you’re warning is reassurance that my feelings about him are right.”

“You’ve always had a good feel for people. Trust it. I’ve got to get some sleep. I’m pulling an extra shift for someone.”

Shelly picked up the coffee cups and went into the kitchen. Someone fixed themselves something to eat and didn’t bother cleaning up after himself. She knew it was not neat Ken. It reminded her of Matt. Shelly shook her head at the realization that was probably one of the reasons why her mother called him Mutt.

Chapter 16

The office parking lot had six cars. Shelly pulled her truck into the nearest one, hoping she wasn’t late.

Jerry the guard was standing at the glassed door as if expecting her. He nodded to her and opened up the door.

“Good afternoon, Jerry.”

“Good afternoon, Ms. Abbott. They’re all upstairs.”

She held up one of the bags of bakery goods. “I bought plenty. How many of you work the weekend?”

“Four.”

“There’s six in this bag. You’ll have to flip for the extras.”

“Thank you Ms. Abbott. These will be appreciated.”

After her lunch with Anthony, which Shelly insisted on driving to in her own vehicle, she stopped at a bakery for their desert. They didn’t have time to order at the restaurant, since they spent a lot of time talking about places Anthony had visited since he was old enough to travel on his own.

What she was finding out about having money was that she didn’t just buy for herself, but to stimulate the economy, as Ken described it. She bought a dozen pastries from a young woman who looked too young to be doing it for a living. Her guess was the young girl was working in the family’s bakery.

The elevator opened, smelling strongly of the pastries. She could see down the hall the double doors to the law office were opened. Mrs. Moore, John Parker’s secretary escorted Shelly to the office.

“I told you she would be bringing desert,” Anthony said. He took a deep breath. “I love the smell of fresh baked foods.”

Mrs. Moore took Shelly’s bag of pastry. She arranged everything artfully on a linen napkin draped over a tray. China coffee cups for each person; sugar, one brand for John’s taste and another for Anthony; a non-creamer for her and half-and-half for Mr. Walker were neatly arranged on the table. Three spoons. Nothing extraneous. Shelly didn’t use a spoon to stir her contents. She poured her non-creamer in first and liked to let the added coffee stir the contents together. Mrs. Moore knew all Mr. Parker’s visitors’ personal tastes.

“Thank you, Mrs. Moore. Give us two hours.”

“Yes, Mr. Parker.”

“Ms. Abbott...Shelly,” Mr. Walker amended, “are you open to moving into a more secure residence?”

“Why...exactly?”

“I think you would be safer and you can concentrate on your art rather than unannounced visitors,” John Parker said.

“Did that fire have anything to do with me?”

“Yes and no.” John looked over at Anthony. “Would you like to contribute something?”

“The family history. By family I’m referring to the Hayes. Very old money and these days, not liking to be mentioned in newspapers. Grandfather likes to say he runs a tight ship, though an occasional member does jump ship. Needless to say, they’re not off ship for long. Any mistakes made are not mentioned, but they are handled behind the scenes.” He paused as if he had lost his train of thought.

“So, what does this mean to me? Have I been drafted or something?” Shelly asked when no one said anything more.

“You’re a Hayes with Hayes’ money and voting rights on various boards, but...” Anthony hesitated again.

“But I’m not a Hayes,” Shelly said. “I didn’t grow up as one. That makes me an outsider. Is this why we’re having this meeting – I’m something to be handled behind the scenes?”

“You’re a Hayes,” Anthony said looking more uncomfortable.

“You’re the first born of BC Hayes, which gives you more voting rights than cousins that have grown up as Hayes. This meeting is to let you know about the Hayes’ businesses that you’re rightfully heir to and to make sure an outsider doesn’t interfere with you,” John Parker said.

“Ashley Bower Hayes Bullock Sexton, my mother, is the outsider,” Anthony said. He sighed as if that lifted a heavy weight off his shoulders.

“But she married a Hayes.”

“Not the same thing. She was raised in Bower money and loyalty. She uses her father’s fondness for her to fix things, as he has always done for her. Since your paternity is now public she’s been dropping hints that she set some words into action concerning your welfare. Now more than ever, because your monetary worth is more than hers, she’ll spend more time with her minions on how to hurt you.”

“How would she know I was coming to your place?”

“Cath and Lee, my sisters – you’re lucky you’re not related to them. The only time they come over is when I’m giving a party so they can report to mother my business, so they’re being there when you called to confirm you were coming over was a surprise. Catherine answered my phone when you called to confirm your arrival.” Anthony showed anger for a brief moment then shrugged it off. “Catherine wanted to know who you were. I said it was an artist letting me know she was on her way to fix one of the sculptures I purchased from her. Catherine thought it was important enough to get mother to find a pretext to visit me when you were going to be there. Gregory and Justin’s drug habit was the subject. When you arrived, I was still on the phone making arrangements in a drug treatment center, wondering why her social secretary wasn’t doing this. Mother offered to see if you were doing your job properly. You didn’t make an impression on her because when she returned she seemed positively angry with Catherine to have dragged

her over to see some new up-and-coming artist as if it warranted her being late to her dinner engagement.”

“So...” Shelly shook her head at information that didn’t make sense to her. “Are you saying your mother is upset because of me? Why?” Shelly asked.

“Pride. Father was supposed to marry her by arrangement. Instead he ran off and married your mother, a nobody to the Bowers,” Anthony said. “Not even her detectives could locate your mother, though I’m sure father had something to do with that. I remember them arguing often and it was about the other woman. Mother didn’t know about you but she wanted to make sure to tie up any loose ends. Like a kingdom to be had, she had her eggs and father’s sperm harvested and saved...males only. It was and is one of the thorns under her nails, and now she knows that not only are you his true first born but you inherited the bulk of his wealth and power.”

“Well, I’m not sorry about the money I inherited. It gives me the funds to do what I want without having to worry about where my next paycheck is coming from.”

Suddenly it dawned on what Anthony was hinting at. “Are you saying that this fire was the result of your mother saying something?”

“Yes,” Walker and Parker said in unison.

“This sounds like a mafia family, yet, after meeting her – no offense Anthony but she looks like a toughie.” *Good for you mom. You lived like you wanted to regardless of the old hag’s price tag on you.*

“Old money is like royalty and is above ordinary law. Remember that,” Walker said. “The stories you hear about people in investigative positions that are blackmailed or influenced by people in power are based on fact.” Walker looked over at John Parker.

“You guys are scaring me – to what end?”

“Move to a better protected residence, install a state of the art security system, and hire a security company to protect you.”

“Just how much is that going to cost?”

“You don’t have to worry about money. You also can deduct such things as business expense. Margaret will take care of it. You just have to start the process and we’ll do the rest.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“It’s our job. Mr. Walker works for the Hayes and I work for you,” John Parker said.

“I know I’m not what the Hayes family had in mind,” Shelly said softly. “I don’t plan on marrying a man and producing little heirs, and I run my own life. Does that mean I get knocked off?”

“There are family members that do worst things and they’re still around,” Anthony said.

“Okay. So, do I go into hiding until I have a bodyguard hired?” Though she said it tongue in cheek, she was worried about the effort they were all putting into this meeting.

“We will investigate who is behind the fire and why you were implicated, then we’ll take actions to prevent it from happening again.”

“What about those two detectives that were hassling me?”

“They won’t be bothering you again,” Mr. Walker said assuredly.

“They were operating from a misconception. It has been straightened out,” John Parker said.

“What about the family business...the Hayes? Just what am I supposed to be doing?” Shelly asked.

“Grandfather would like to see you. I’ll call you and let you know the exact meeting time.” Anthony slid a binder in her direction. “This contains information you need to know. It’s confidential so don’t leave it out on the coffee table. Do you want me to pick you up when the arrangements are made?”

“Is there a dress code for the meeting?” Shelly asked.

Anthony slapped his forehead. “I forgot. You haven’t been taken shopping yet for the family uniform, replete with the family monogram.” The three men laughed at Shelly’s expression. “I’m kidding,” Anthony said.

“Halley will be back later tonight. She can take her shopping in the morning.” Parker glanced at his watch. “She was delayed by one of the attendees of her monthly gatherings.”

Anthony raised an eyebrow. “Not the one that’s chasing her, is it?”

“Probably. However, she has the dogs with her and they don’t like the woman nor does she like them. I have confidence in Halley being able to take care of herself. Back to our business at hand... Do we have your approval to go about retaining a security service for you?”

“Yes. Do I interview any of them?”

“Yes. We will have a selection of about ten for you to choose from. Now, about moving your residence...”

“As long as it’s not going to be in a huge mansion. I can’t see wasting all that space or hiring twenty people to clean it. I certainly don’t plan on inviting family and friends for sleepovers.”

“How many bedrooms would you like it to have?”

“Three, a workroom, a garage for two or make it three vehicles and...” She shook her head. “Already I’m making the place bigger.”

“We’ll come up with a dozen likeable places...”

“I’ll look for her,” Anthony smiled. “I am in the business and I do know her taste.”

“You do?” Shelly asked.

“Yes. Trust me?”

“I’ll try you out,” she said. “But you have one chance, and then I go looking myself.”

“She owns enough property that she doesn’t need to buy more,” Parker told him sternly.

“What does she have that’s available?”

“Halley handles her account.”

“I’ll call her tomorrow,” Anthony said. “So, is this meeting over?”

“Unless you have some questions, Shelly?”

“Is there a Hayes101 class that goes along with this binder?”

“I’ll show you the ropes. We’ll start with getting you a new car. We can go and look right now,” Anthony said.

“And where am I going to park it? I’m not getting rid of my truck because whatever new car I get, I doubt I’ll be transporting art in it.”

Anthony said. "Park the truck on the street and your car in the driveway until you get your new residence."

"You've got to be kidding, right? The parking horrors of Venice Beach are not exaggerated. All right, all right. I know that look. I have plenty of time to move my truck for street sweeping and such. Or I can rent a space. I forgot I can afford it."

"Have a nice day, Ms. Abbot," Parker said.

"Don't hesitate to call either of us if anything comes up," Walker said. The seriousness of his voice had Shelly imagining mafia hits directed at her.

"I'll be sure to call," Shelly said.

They walked to the parking lot where Anthony had his dark green Jaguar XK.

"Just how serious are they about calling whenever?" Shelly asked.

"Serious. If you feel your life is in danger, call. Let me see your cell phone."

He opened her door for her and while he walked around to the driver's side Shelly looked around the car. She liked the console and the seats were comfortable.

"So, what do you think about my Jag?" he asked as he buckled his seat belt.

"It's nice," she said.

"You can buy one and if you don't like it swap it for another model. Carlos knows my taste and after a year he has another model ready for me."

He turned her cell on and scrolled through her menu. "I'm going to put in two phone numbers. You just need to hit #1 for Parker and #2 for me."

"How do you know I don't already have a #1?" He gave a short laugh and continued keying in numbers. "Why are you doing all this for me, Anthony? And does anyone ever call you Tony?"

"Grandfather has put me in charge of you...which I volunteered for...and please don't call me Tony. We have too many of those in the family."

"Why not AH? Oh, I see already. What's your middle name?"

"Clifford. The same as dad's. AC Hayes. Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

However, I'm not high enough in the power queue to be using initials."

"Oh. Power means your name becomes an acronym."

"That's right. An acronym for power in family politics. It's better than having a nickname that is associated with scorn. Then when you're older it becomes leverage against you."

Shelly laughed. "You have got to be kidding me. It sounds like a fraternity club...or sorority where no one grows up."

"Think of it this way...if you're in the middle of a power deal, wielding your influence to get those undecideds on your side...you don't want someone to call you by a nickname that will have everyone snickering."

"I can see how that would undermine you. So, where are we going?"

"To see Carlos in Torrance. Pacific Coast Highway."

"This is not a business that you own partnership in or something like that."

"Family friend."

"As in Hayes family or personal friend?"

"Hayes."

It was amazing how money could influence the purchase of a new vehicle. Anthony called ahead and there was someone waiting for them when they arrived. It wasn't Carlos, but an older woman, Sandra who knew her business. Color was decided

first. It was assumed that it was to be fully loaded. Sandra produced three models for Shelly to drive around the block and the one she liked was taken for a longer drive along the ocean. Within thirty minutes of making up her mind the papers and car were ready. Her choice was a Jaguar X in gold. What took longest was dropping the new car off, driving back to the Parker parking lot and getting her truck. Finding an open space to park took her further from her apartment than she would like but it was the truck that she doubted anyone would want to steal. She promised herself she would arrange for a permanent parking space tomorrow, though rumor was, there was a long waiting list.

By the time Shelly got home, all she wanted to do was lock herself up in her workshop and work. She should have the right to work whenever she wanted to. After all she had the money and owned the garage and she also had a sign outside saying she was busy, so why was it difficult to get her work done?



The phone had been ringing for hours. It rang persistently then stopped and resumed. Shelly could hear it through her closed bedroom door and through the closed door from her bedroom to workroom. If Ken was home he would have pulled the phone out of the wall or disconnected the phone. So, why couldn't she get herself to do that? If it was someone calling her, she thought they would be calling her cell phone. Thinking of that, Shelly patted the clip on her belt where her cell was kept. It was still there.

Irritated at still hearing the ring, she twisted the wire on the small mockup and the whole project jerked toward her, bounced and then dropped to the floor, coming apart. Slamming her pliers on the bench she stared at the broken project. There was no desire to fix it. There was no desire to do any work. She checked the clock. It was almost 10PM.

"I'm rich beyond my imagination. Why am I staying home?" Shelly smirked. "People with money are supposed to ooze with self-confidence. Why, I don't know. I think I'll go out and see if this is true."

From her closet, she pulled out clothes she used to wear to work. Her only designer clothes were what she wore to Anthony's party. They would have to do. This was going to be a tasting visit. Ken mentioned a nice enough bar on Abbott Kinney. How coincidental that her name was in there. The name of the bar escaped her but it shouldn't be too hard to see who entered the bars on that street. Satisfied she had a plan for the night she took a shower and dressed. Ken cautioned her about her money and what to do with it, how much to carry and always have a backup plan. To him that meant taxi money.

It was a short debate on whether to drive her new car or the truck. The new car won out because of the difficulties she would have in finding a parking space on the street when she got back.

Sunday night was busy but she managed to find a bar that had obvious lesbian women entering it from the alley just off the street and lining the street smoking, talking and watching the night traffic. A parking space a block down opened up as she arrived. All the signs were showing this was a good thing she was doing. At the door, her ID was requested with a cover fee. A band was pounding out their sounds while conversations tried to be heard over their noise.

"Good evening, what are you drinking?" The bartender a slim looking woman with tattoos and rings attached in places Shelly found uncomfortable, yelled at her.

"7up."

Her request was before her quickly. She handed her a 20 and turned to see what was going around her. In her mind, she was remembering what she had seen Ken do when she visited bars with him occasionally. Those were days when he felt she needed some socialization in the gay world and dragged her whining out to see the night life.

She took a deep gulp of her drink.

A woman next to her, bursting out of her leather vest and jeans leaned into her.

“Playing it safe? So what are you? Some straight trying to see if you can be gay for the night?”

Shelly was going to give her a sharp reply when she remembered, she was rich. She could be anything she darn well pleased. Shelly ignored her.

“So, what are you?” the woman persisted.

“I’m a woman having a 7up in a bar,” Shelly told her.

“You’re a freaking straight,” she accused.

“Heddy, knock it off. You’re interfering with my customers.”

Shelly wanted to take her eyes off Heddy, not wanting to face what she could feel as danger, but Ken had told her to keep her eyes on the person that is a threat to her. Heddy didn’t move away from the bar, nor discontinue glaring at her. Shelly guessed Heddy was drunk and was not happy about something.

A woman moved between Heddy and Shelly and ordered a drink. Shelly raised her eyes to hers and recognized her as one of the people at Anthony’s art party.

“Thanks,” Shelly said.

“My pleasure. I’m Linda.”

“Shelly.”

“I saw you at one of Anthony Hayes’ parties. The rumor is you’re his favorite artist at the moment.”

The “at the moment” part brought her defenses up. Maybe the gossip hadn’t gotten around yet that she was also his half-sister. Seeking something to say that was neutral; she only came up with the usual. “Nice bar.”

Linda nodded to her, giving the impression that an understanding had been reached between them but Shelly was not really sure what that was.

“Enjoy your visit.”

“Thanks.”

Linda left to go to a table where there were more people around it than chairs could fit.

“So you’re an artist. I hear...”

“Heddy, leave her alone,” the bartender said. She sat another 7up next to Shelly’s half finished one. “Compliments of Linda.”

“Thanks.”

Shelly tried not to look at Heddy, but under the act of removing her change under her 7up, she did notice that Heddy was drinking hard liquor. She wondered how people could drink heavily and get in their car afterward. Due in large part because of her father or step-father’s death, her mother had stressed that drinking any amount of liquor and driving was not okay, and it was something that Shelly used often as an excuse to get out of drinking when she attended any social functions that served liquor.

“Not a drinker?” a voice on the other side of her asked.

Shelly looked at the other woman, nondescript and nonthreatening.

“Not when I’m driving.”

“One won’t hurt you,” she said.

“I don’t know that.”

“I’m Angie, by the way.”

“Shelly.”

“How come you talk to her and not to me?” demanded Heddy.

Shelly turned to Heddy before she remembered Ken’s warning that drunks and aggressive people don’t hear what you’re saying. “She’s not insulting me,” she said to Heddy.

Heddy picked up her drink and moved away. Angie paid for her refill and moved back to where she had come from...a table full of women. Shelly decided to walk around with her drink. There was always a pool table to socialize around. She went to check it out.

The table was busy so she added her name to the list and found a space along the wall. There were four others ahead of her. Shelly watched a leathered woman knock them all out in quick succession. Each new player would flip to see who would rack the balls and if they got one shot in as soon as they missed the leathered woman would clear the table.

Candy was the woman before and she was up. She got to shoot first and she was proceeding to sink the balls into the pockets but the leathered woman didn’t seem concerned. She took a place against the wall next to Shelly.

“Got a name?” she asked Shelly.

“Yeah, and you?” Shelly smiled.

The woman laughed and pointed to the board with the name, Sam. Candy missed and it was Sam’s turn. Candy cursed and put her stick up against the wall as if she knew it was the end. Sam then started to knock the balls into the pockets, sometimes two at a time. It took less than five minutes.

Sam gestured to Shelly. “Go ahead and rack ‘em, Shelly.”

Shelly picked up a stick and took the challenge. Sam was not serious in her first two shots and let Shelly have two tries before she cleaned the table.

“Nice meeting you, Shelly,” Sam said. She held her hand out and from the firm grip, Shelly was grateful she wasn’t into squeezing hands. Though Sam wore long sleeves, Shelly thought she was covering muscular forearms and maybe tattoos.

Shelly walked around the small bar and then headed out. There was nothing of interest. She could hear Heddy shouting at her to wait up. She turned in time to see Heddy coming at her. It was difficult in the dark to see what her intention was so Shelly stepped to one side and let Heddy’s momentum carry her stumbling into the gutter. A few women passing shook their heads and continued their way into the bar. Heddy’s curses were enough to let Shelly know she was not seriously injured.

Shelly hurried on to her car, grateful she didn’t drink anything.

Chapter 17

The next morning she ran with Ken along the beach. He didn’t mention her new car but he appeared preoccupied and Shelly was content with the silence as she had her

own thoughts to ponder. After the run, Shelly took her shower first and retreated to her studio and Ken to his loft with a book.

At noon Shelly was in the kitchen making a sandwich when someone knocked on the door. Peeking out the side window before opening the door, Shelly was pleased to see Anthony's Jag. She pulled open the door.

"Hi, Anthony. Do you want an egg sandwich?" She glanced up at Ken's loft to be sure she didn't wake him.

Anthony jingled keys.

"What's that?"

"Keys to one of your ocean front properties on the beach. Remember that fire on the beach about a year ago?"

"I think so."

"This was one of them that burned down. The previous tenant has since found another place to rent. Since it had steel frames it didn't take long to rebuild. Your neighbors on both sides are nearly finished too."

"On the beach-beach? I'd love to see it." They both started out the door when Ken leaned over the railing.

"Hey, where are you two going?"

"To see a possible new home. Want to come along?" Shelly asked.

Ken didn't look like they had wakened him.

"Yeah. I have nothing better to do. I've been meaning to ask you, did you buy a new car?"

"A Jag, almost like Anthony's. Want to ride in my new car?"

"Yeah. Can I borrow it one of these nights?" he asked.

"Sure, but you'll have to get your own insurance. I hear cops are crazy drivers." The frown on Ken's forehead was matched in his eyes. Before she could ask him what was up, he said, "I heard that too." Mentally she made a note as soon as they were alone to find out what was going on with him. It had to do with his job because he should be sleeping for night shift.

Shelly pulled her new car out and Anthony parked his car in the driveway. While he was parking Shelly looked over at Ken. "So, what's going on?"

"I'll tell you later, but it means I won't be going into work until it's cleared up."

Anthony slid into the passenger seat and any further conversation about Ken's problem was left for later.

Anthony directed her along PCH until they passed the Hertz House.

"See the post with the blue and orange flag? Park there."

Shelly parked in the driveway and noticed there was room for at least four vehicles.

"The wind shields haven't gone up. They just finished construction," Anthony said. "Is there something specific about how you want your patio landscape to look?" Anthony unlocked the construction gate that was protecting the three homes then led them down a stairway that led to the beach. He stopped at a security gate that opened up onto a patio.

"No. I'm not a gardening person. I'll let the contractor figure out what's practical."

They walked up the brick stairs to a deck that extended from a brick patio. The wind blew strongly against them.

Ken went over to inspect the grill, lifting covers and opening doors in the brick centerpiece. "This is a great Bar-B-Q and is this a smoker?" Ken said. "Shelly, we've got to move here. Ocean view property, patio setup for great cook-outs...what's the house look like?"

"No need to look inside." Shelly stood at the highest part of the patio and held her arms out as the wind whipped against her. "What a view! We're moving," Shelly said. The three laughed from the shared excitement. "Let's see what's inside."

"They still have to put up the plastic wind guards which are also security fences or you would be blown back into the house when you open up the sliding doors. When that's done, the landscaper will come in and plant flowers. Otherwise the wind will uproot everything." Anthony led them to a glassed door on the side. He handed Shelly the keys and she unlocked it and stepped in.

Shelly's mouth fell open in surprise. Ken close behind spun around taking in the wide-open space.

"It has four bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs and a maid's room downstairs with a private bathroom behind here." Anthony opened up the closet door that had a shower and toilet. "It's a guest toilet. This building is larger than the previous one. Garden space not used was taken up giving you more closet space and garage space, three car garage. The maid's room is larger due to the garage is wider. It has solar and wind power which is already hooked up and collecting. The security goes in tomorrow. Hopefully, within a week you can move in, though it would be better sooner."

"Why?" Ken asked.

"Someone may be out to get me," Shelly said.

"How many jealous artists wielding hammers do you think are out there?" Ken asked. Shelly elbowed him.

"Ouch." Ken rubbed his side. "How hard can it be to watch you work...actually, not falling asleep as you work?" he teased.

The front room had a stone tiled floor that went into the kitchen. A stone fireplace, with a kitchen bar separated the two rooms. Without furniture, it looked roomier than most apartments Shelly had lived in. The kitchen was designed for someone that liked to cook, more than what Shelly thought she would ever do in a lifetime. Ken opened the refrigerator and the light came on.

"The electricity is already turned on," Ken said.

"The solar panels are charging the batteries. It just needs tenants and furniture," Anthony said.

"And the security system plugged in," Ken said. He held up a wire that needed to be attached somewhere.

"We can start moving the furniture in when? I like this place. This is the maid's room? It's bigger than our front room where we are now." Shelly looked over at Ken.

"Would you mind having someone cook for you? Clean up after you?"

"You mean get married?"

Shelly made a face at him.

“Let’s go look upstairs and pick our rooms,” Shelly said, and raced Ken up the stairs. Two of the bedrooms faced the ocean with a shared balcony. Two bedrooms across the hall faced the road with a less expansive balcony.

“This is beautiful!” The three stood on the balcony looking out over the ocean. The wind and sand blew against them.

“The windscreens will be put in tomorrow. Do you want patio furniture up here?”

“Yes,” Shelly and Ken chorused.

“Anthony, who’s managing this property’s reconstruction?” Ken asked.

“Alan Conley. He’s Halley’s assistant. He handles property investments.”

Shelly looked at Ken. “So, we’re moving up in the world. Living here with me isn’t going to ruin your reputation, is it?”

“Or maybe I’ll ruin yours. I’m suspended without pay until they investigate a complaint.”

“What?” both Shelly and Anthony said?

“Someone reported that I fixed a ticket for Eric for a two week trip to Sedona.”

“Eric Kingsman?” Shelly demanded.

“Yeah.”

Anthony sighed. “Eric’s mother and my mother are friends – close friends.”

“I smell a skunk,” Shelly and Ken said together.

Shelly glared at Anthony then brightened as she had an idea. “Ken, why don’t you come and work for me until it’s cleared up?”

“Doing what?”

“Bodyguard. You can manage my security.”

Ken laughed shaking his head. “There’s more to that job than being a cop. I was joking about dozing while you work.”

“Go to school. I can pay... Right?” she turned to Anthony. He was giving Ken a speculative look.

“Do you know why I’m being setup?” Ken asked Anthony.

Anthony grimaced, and sighed. “It sounds like something Ashley...my mother, would do to harass Shelly. I’ll speak to CG about it.”

“CG?”

“Grandfather, Clifford Gaylord Hayes,” Anthony said.

“What about a lawyer?” Shelly said.

“I have a lawyer with the police union,” Ken said.

“I would advise you to have a private one too. You’re dealing with people that have lots of money and time to figure out how to screw with your life. Eric likes to hurt people because he can get away with it. With mother involved I’m sure they’re out to get you fired.”

Ken looked surprised. “He was never mean to me, just Shelly, which is why I stopped seeing him.”

“You dumped him for a girl?” Anthony asked incredulously, “Well right there is the reason he would set you up. His focus will be planning and executing how to make you regret that.”

Ken looked at Shelly for a few moments before saying, “This changes everything.”

Shelly sighed and looked around. "Well, the upside of this is we're getting a new house."

Ken nodded.

"Well, then. It's settled. My first showing of a house and it's a done deal," Anthony said. "They'll be working on the other properties for a while. Also, the beach is public land and sight seers like to walk along with cameras hoping to see a movie star – that is until high tide. The glass windows are one way, and bullet proof."

"So why do you think this is safer than the one in Venice Beach?"

"You have fewer neighbors and once they're moved in, they'll be more vigilant than where you are now. You'll also have a better security system when it's installed."

The three headed back to Shelly's car. One tire was flat with a screw driver hanging out of the tire.

"Well, whoever made the hole in the tire didn't do it with the screwdriver," Ken remarked.

"Not unless he or she is a weight lifter," Anthony agreed.

"I hope this car has a spare." Shelly popped the trunk.

Ken noted a familiar car pulling out from along the road. Both he and Shelly were watching it speed off up PCH.

"Who's that?" Anthony asked.

"It looks like Eric," Shelly said.

"It looks like his car," Ken said. "It's too far away to get the license number."

Anthony pulled out his cell phone.

"Can't call the police on maybe's," Ken told Anthony.

"Who said I'm calling the cops?" Anthony walked a short distance from them.

While Ken changed the tire they talked about how to make the place more secure. If Shelly parked there in the dark, there were too many places someone could be waiting for her. She would always have to park her car in the garage and she heard of too many attacks against women who opened up their garage door.

By the time they were back at the house, Anthony looked tired. After Anthony left, Shelly began rummaging around in the refrigerator for an apple.

"Ken!"

"What?"

"Someone's been in here. Look at my apples. All of them are sliced up."

Ken stood next to her, looking over the contents in the refrigerator. "Who has a copy of the key to this place?"

"I don't know, but no one that I gave a copy to. It looks like the alarm was disengaged. Just how easy is it to break into this place?"

"If you know what you're doing, easy enough." He emptied what was in the refrigerator and dumped it in a plastic bag.

Shelly called #1 on her cell.



In two hours a bodyguard was sitting in the front room. Jimmy Susa. Jimmy and Ken had gone through the entire house and pulled out monitoring gizmos and a stink bomb on a timer. Ken refused a bodyguard for himself so Mr. Parker asked Ken if he was interested in training with the company that his law firm hired their bodyguards from.

Shelly felt safe enough to fall asleep on the couch.

Chapter 18

Shelly peered through the window from the backseat at the building that loomed over the dirt parking lot Halley was pulling into. It reminded her of a warehouse. Shelly's second shift bodyguard, Meriner, sat in the back with her also looking around the parking area. Lauren sitting in the passenger seat in the front was excited with the prospect of looking over a new workshop.

The parking spaces were marked with numbers with two visitor spaces. A concrete walkway led under a trellis archway that was heavy with flowers.

"I've never seen flowers like that," Shelly said.

"They are beautiful and fragrant. Gaylin said it's called a shell plant," Halley said.

"How come you've never taken me here?" Lauren asked her mother.

"Because you're always in school," Halley said. "The residents call it the Artists' Barn."

The four slid out of the Mercedes and followed the dirt walkway into a courtyard that was half concrete and half dirt. There was no shelter up from the sun at the moment, but there were concrete bases that looked like an umbrella or overhead covers could be setup. The courtyard had buckets filled with sand, a bar-b-q chained to the concrete, a picnic table – also chained to the concrete and potted plants overflowing with tomatoes, strawberries and a vine that grew out of a pot and ran along one side of the courtyard. A dog barked, joined in by another. The building was a two-storied warehouse in the shape of a U. It was a 30-minute walk from Shelly's soon to be new residence.

"You can either lift the door like a garage door to move out large objects or just open this door." Halley flipped the light switch on and the entire room lit up. She gestured for Shelly to enter. It was about the same amount of space as her garage.

"This looks okay. Concrete floor. Cabinets." Shelly pulled open the drawers. "Roomy drawers. A long work table that I can add my clamps to. Sturdy shelves. Two vents." Shelly looked at the ceiling. "A hoist."

"It has a small restroom with a shower," Lauren said. "Can I still come over and work?"

Shelly looked at Halley then at Lauren. "I have no problem with that. Just let me know when you're coming over."

Halley nodded. "We'll make arrangements. It's not that anyone here is a known child molester, but I don't know everyone."

"Are you sure this place is safe?" Shelly asked. If she wanted to work around the clock on a project she didn't want to worry about her safety, forgetting momentarily that she now had a bodyguard.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I just don't want Lauren to be exposed to some things in life until she's old enough to vote. There are fifteen artists that work here. Five live in the lofts above. As you can see, yours is not setup for living here. Besides the toilet and shower, you have a sink for cleanup, electrical outlets for heavy equipment and..." she looked around, "no air conditioning or heater. It's primitive for some and basic for others."

“There’s room for a couch, refrigerator and microwave besides my work equipment, just in case I pull an all-nighter.” She glanced at Meriner. “And I’ll bring a fold up chair for my guard so he doesn’t fall asleep.”

“One with a padded seat would be nice,” Meriner said.

“Let’s go upstairs and I’ll introduce you to Gaylin. She’s the manger of this place. Her name’s Gaylin Howell. She’s an established artist in weaving.” Halley leaned close to Shelly. “By the way, you’re the landlady,” she whispered.

“Does anyone know that?” Shelly asked.

“It’s up to you.”

The stairs to the second floor were made of steel. Their footsteps made a lot of noise as they climbed. The stairs ended up in a wide-open space. Halley closed the door behind them.

“On rainy days, everyone that wants to continue to work and can move their art pieces, brings their work up here. The freight elevator is right over there. We’re a family here,” a different voice explained. “Some days we get along fine and others we’re cranky and fussing.”

Shelly turned to look at a woman with her hair wrapped in a bandanna. Her brown face had depigmented blotches standing out in contrast.

“Hello, Gaylin. This is Shelly Abbott – Shelly this is Gaylin.”

Gaylin nodded and looked Shelly up and down. “A welder, huh? What kind?”

“Arc, heavy welding and cutting.”

“Need a dolly?”

“I have a few.”

Gaylin nodded. “So, did you decide to take the place?”

“I would like to try it out.”

“Alright. I’ll give you a month agreement to sign. You still need first and last month. You’ll also need insurance to cover whatever damage you may cause. No pets. We’ve got enough already.”

A meow from behind them had everyone looking toward the hallway.

“Oh, she’s so cute,” Lauren said.

“Anabella thinks so too. She likes to wander up here but Godie has his dog today. Those pit bulls are not to be trusted with snotty cats.” She looked toward the stairs they had come up to make sure the door was closed.

“Can I pet her?” Lauren asked.

They followed Gaylin into her loft.

“If she let’s you. Introduce yourself to her. That string toy over there would help put you on her good side.”

Gaylin’s loft was bright with natural sunlight from one skylight. It was one big room with elaborate screens separating two areas. Anabella darted to her elaborate cat pole that ran along a bay window that looked out at PCH. The ocean view was cut off by apartments. Gaylin had three projects going, two in yarn and fabric and the third in beads.

While Gaylin pulled out the paperwork for Shelly to sign, Lauren played with Anabella and looked around between cat swipes at the string.

“When will you be moving your stuff in?” Gaylin asked.

“I’ll start today. I’ll haul in the small stuff.”

She was handed a key, and a piece of paper that had dates and times and the rules.

“When you’re planning on moving big things let me know. As you can tell we have assigned parking.” She walked Shelly over to a window that overlooked the interior courtyard. From there, Shelly could see a garden with rows of vegetables and vines with melons.

“When we have large works moving in or out, we block off the visitors parking area so a truck can pull in. Your space is #5.”



Lauren and Halley helped Shelly move her light weight equipment and material they could carry over in Shelly’s truck. While Shelly stored her equipment the way she wanted it, Lauren proudly showed Halley her supplies and what she was thinking of doing with it.

Shelly bought dinner which they brought back to the warehouse and shared with Gaylin. Gaylin and Halley talked art and artists and by Gaylin’s glances at Shelly she was sure Gaylin was curious why she didn’t know the latest gossip on the other artists and their peeves.

The next morning Shelly had movers take care of the rest of her equipment. She no longer felt comfortable in her dream workshop and wanted to get settled somewhere to get back into working on her projects. Ken was sent off to a boot camp for his bodyguard training, so her only company was four bodyguards in six hour shifts that hung around in the background.

While her equipment was moved in she met the other artists. They were all professional with their work either sold in stores or in galleries. Larry Slider, a graphics web designer, set up websites for all of them. His loft was on the right side of the building where he lived with a cat and dog. Most of his nights were spent trolling the bars for business and company.

Four of the artists were women, counting her. Vickie, Gaylin, June and her. June’s conversations, Shelly found, were heavy with the “f” word, and extra heavy with degrading references. She looked barely legal and tended to dress the part of a heavy metal follower.

The day after her shop was setup she began to assemble pieces. Loud verbally abusive rap blared from one of the rooms. It was difficult to concentrate with the hate that blared from the speakers. Shelly was hesitant to say anything, worrying that the person listening to it may react violently.

“Want to try these?” her bodyguard Meriner asked.

He pulled out an iPod from his pocket.

“What do you have on it?” she asked suspiciously.

“Try it, you may like it,” he grinned.

She put one ear bud in and listened. “Oh,” she grinned. It was a selection of Indian chants. “This is nice.” Happier, she went back to work.

The noise from the torch and music covered the opening of the door but paper she had her sketch on fluttered away. Turning swiftly, Shelly turned the torch off, raised her face shield and unhooked her respirator. Tommy Fernald stood in the doorway looking around. Thoroughly irritated at being interrupted again by Tommy, she removed her heavy gloves and slapped them on the table.

“Not bad. I heard you moved so I thought I would come down and take a look,” Tommy said.

“You’ve looked, now leave,” Shelly told her tersely.

“What is with you that you’re so rude?”

“I’m busy. Just like last time. You keep interrupting me and dropping in without an invite. I’ll also remind you that the last time you made an appearance you sent your girlfriend with a hammer to my home. Now get out.”

“What Lee does is of her own...”

“You lied to her to set her off. That makes Lee’s reaction your responsibility. Get out of my studio.”

Lee didn’t see Meriner yet, but he started to move toward her when the door opened and Gaylin walked in.

“What’s all the noise about?”

“Tommy is being asked to leave, now.”

“Tommy, why are you bothering my tenant?”

Tommy snorted, “She’s not your tenant, Gay-lin. She’s a Hayes, your boss.”

Gaylin looked surprised.

“Ohhh, did I tell a secret?” Tommy taunted.

“You’ve been asked to leave, now,” Gaylin told her firmly. Tommy left laughing. Gaylin’s standing in the doorway prevented Tommy from slamming the door behind her.

“Thanks for letting me handle it Meriner,” Shelly said.

“You did say low profile, but if she got one inch closer, she was going to be escorted out the door.”

“You’re my boss?” Gaylin asked.

“Whoever hired you is your boss. I’m just an artist that is trying to find a quiet place to work.”

“Quiet, yes. Usually it’s just the hum of machinery or a barking dog. Adrian has his nephew over, cleaning up his place for extra money. He had his music up too high and I had to say something. Everyone has their own little world they work in, you know? I tell everyone that rents here, there are earplugs you can wear if you need your music cranked up.”

“Do you mind if I have an electrician come over and put a light alarm on my door?”

“I’ll check with the owner,” Gaylin laughed. “Some of the others wouldn’t mind one too. We all would like something to warn us that we’re not alone.”

“Who do you usually go through to get things fixed?”

“I call Alan Conley, Halley’s assistant, and it gets taken care of.”

“I don’t want to interrupt the flow of things.”

“I understand perfectly. Business as usual. Kinda of unusual for her to be sniffing after an artist that isn’t starving. I hope the mischief she’s up to doesn’t ruin your stay here. “

“Do you get strangers wandering in the building?”

“Occasionally. That’s why we have Max. He’s a little guy but to him this entire place is his territory and he barks at anyone he doesn’t like. Then there’s Walter’s dog, Brutus. Brutus is a pit bull that Walter insists is harmless but I’ve seen the way he looks at the cats. I tell him the only way Brutus can be here is if he’s on leash or locked up inside his shop. We’ve got some wild cats living around here and most of us like their company.”

Gaylin pulled out her cell phone. It was vibrating in her hand. "Excuse me. I've been waiting for this call. I'll talk to you later, Shelly."

After Gaylin left Shelly looked over at Meriner who moved his stool so that he had a better view of the courtyard and who was coming in.

She put the buds back in her ears and resumed her work. After that, her work went smoothly. The iPod started music she wasn't interested in and since she had it long enough, gave it back to Meriner. She turned the fan on and then began to solder the base. When her mother was alive she would make a small working model first, but doing that brought too much grief in remembering who the small models were for, which would bring a halt to her work.

Sitting back on her heels she regarded her progress. She switched off the torch and turned to see how her bodyguard was doing. Jerry was sitting in the chair watching her.

She pulled off her mask and respirator feeling guiltily. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was late."

Jerry looked at her surprised. "Don't stop on my account. I'm here for six hours whether you work, sleep, or eat."

"What time is it?"

He looked at his watch. "12:10am."

That meant Jimmy had come and gone and without her even noticing his presence. She stretched her back then began putting away her equipment. On the bench the gadgets that she selected to be on the inside of her latest creation were laid out. Going over them again she decided to change them around. From the storage drawers, she pulled out others that would look better and put away the ones no longer wanted. Forgetting she intended to leave she became occupied with arranging how she wanted the inside of her sculpture to look. A rapping on the door had her turning to see who it was. Jerry was on his feet eyeing the opening door.

"Hey, I was worried about you," Ken told her. He glanced at Jerry and nodded.

"Are you back? I'm sorry. I would have called..." her voice trailed off.

"It was easier to know if you were all right when your workshop was attached to the house." Ken told her.

"Are you hungry?" Shelly asked him.

"No. I ate. I see you haven't missed your dinner." An empty pizza box was at one end of her workbench.

"It's handy to just order delivery. I need to get some sleep." Now that she wasn't working she realized she was tired. "Did you walk here?"

"No. I came to remind you that tomorrow the moving van comes to pack up our things and take them to our new castle."

"I forgot. At least I have my things boxed."

"Well, let's go home. You and I have an early run before the movers come," Ken said.

Chapter 19

“Are you sure we’re not being mean to Tommy?” Shelly asked as she ran next to Ken.

“He’s riding a bike, Shelly. Just worry if you slow down any more that he’ll run you over. After we clean up, what say we go over to your new house and see how the movers did with the furniture?”

“After that, you can drop me off at my studio. Since my truck is still there I have a ride back.”

“What are you working on?” Ken asked.

“Two projects for a Santa Monica gallery. They’re both partially finished and I have a design I want to put down on paper.” She grinned. “I’m really happy with my work.”

“You look it.”

Two hours later, after they all showered, changed and had breakfast, Ken drove them over to Shelly’s house on the beach. There were two patrol people and one had a dog. Tommy waved at them and led the way up the walkway and into the patio area of Shelly’s house. The landscaper had come and gone.

“This is nice,” Shelly said. “I can’t believe that it’s mine.”

“I can’t wait to try out the grill and play around with the smoker. Very nice,” Ken said.

Shelly tried her key and let them in, with Tommy going in first.

Along with their furniture was the new 25 gallon saltwater tank Ken bought. When Shelly first met Ken he had a smaller version. Nothing live was in it yet. Ken wanted to wait until they moved in before he started anything more than the water.

“This place looks like it’s ready for us to move in,” Ken remarked.

“It just needs the security program setup on the computer. The PC is in that closet with the lock,” Tommy said. “We don’t have anyone available until Wednesday. We’ve been advised to tell you to wait until that’s done before you move in.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Shelly said. “I don’t have security setup at the house we’re in now and all our furniture is here.” She looked over at Ken who looked like he was thinking the same as her. She grinned at him and got a smile in return.

“Then it’s settled. We’ve officially moved in.”

They walked up the stairs and looked in their bedrooms. Her bedroom furniture was setup and the boxes labeled Shelly’s bedroom sat against a wall waiting to be unpacked. Shelly went out on the balcony. The wind screens were up and their patio furniture was arranged artfully. “I can’t wait to see what it’s like to witness a storm.”

“As long as you don’t try to walk in it. Blowing sand hurts,” Ken said. He joined her on the balcony.

“This is so beautiful. And it’s ours,” Shelly said.

They went back down stairs and walked through the kitchen. The boxes with their kitchen supplies were neatly stacked. The maid’s room was empty. Shelly was unsure what she was going to do with it. They all piled into the car and drove to the art studio that was down the street.

“Have you ever thought that all this rich life may not last?” Ken asked.

“Yes.”

“Me too,” Ken said.

When they arrived at the studio yellow police tape was wrapped across the parking lot, preventing them from pulling in. It wasn't there when they drove by earlier to their new beach house. Ken found a spot further up the road. The three ran back to the building to see what happened.

A police officer blocked their entrance.

"I own the building," Shelly told the police officer.

Gaylin spotted then and hollered for the detective to let them through.

"What happened?" Shelly asked.

"We had an attempted burglary. Apparently, they didn't know Larry let's his Russell Terrier wander around the upstairs at night and early morning. He started barking up a storm about 6 this morning. Larry, June, Vickie, Max, and me went looking around to see what's going on. We found someone had broken into your studio. They didn't do too much damage."

The three were peering into Shelly's studio. There was tape across the door.

"I have an art show to get ready for," worried Shelly.

"Well, maybe they'll clear out of here soon," Gaylin said. Gaylin looked at the plainclothes officer that joined them. "This is Detective Lee, Shelly. He wants to know if anything is missing."

"Hi, Detective Lee." The last name reminded Shelly of a time before Michelle. She studied the detective as he opened up his notebook, wondering if he was related to Kathleen. How small was her world?

"So, Ms..."

"Shelly. Shelly Abbott."

"Ms. Abbott, can you take a look around and let me know what's missing or has been damaged?"

Tommy Lopez leaned close to Shelly. "I'm going to look over your car. Don't go anywhere alone until I get back."

"All right." Shelly ducked under the tape and before entering looked around. "My things have been moved around." She walked over to her welder cart and found the torch had been smashed. Concerned she unrolled the hose and found a nail impaled in it. Her gloves had some of the fingers cut off. A police officer took pictures as she went through her belongings.

She kept spare parts locked up. She looked at the lock on the shelves she brought. It didn't look tampered with. While she went about replacing parts, the CSI team put what was damaged in evidence bags. Since they had been on site for a while, Shelly guessed they had not thought to look too closely.

"Looks like someone damaged this valve," one of the men said. Now that Shelly showed them that sabotage was the intent of the break in, they looked closer at the work equipment. The crane that moved the heavy equipment had been sawed through. It and whatever she was carrying would have dropped. Shelly worried about Lauren.

Gaylin called the company that installed it to send out someone to repair it.

"So do you know anyone that would do this?" Detective Lee asked.

"Apparently, I've moved in with baggage," Shelly said. "I know five possibilities. Tommy Fernald, Lee Weston, Matt Redfield, Eric Kingsman and or Ashley Sexton. Eric was around when I found a nail in my tire the other night. Matt...well, Matt

is not someone I would like to be around alone. Tommy and Lee would know how to damage welder's tools and Ashley Sexton..."

"If you're on Mrs. Sexton's black list," Detective Lee said, "then you better move somewhere else and change your name. She's bad news to be in your business."

Shelly looked at the detective. "This sabotage would have caused serious injury to me and whoever else is nearby."

It was late in the evening before the police tape was removed and Shelly began to work on her projects. Whoever had broken into her shop had not damaged any of her work, just sabotaged her equipment.

During her work, one bodyguard replaced another and someone dropped off some food.

"Shelly?"

Shelly turned her torch off and turned around. Lifting her faceplate, she removed her respirator. "Yeah?"

"Can you come up to Gaylin's loft? They're having a late-night meeting," Ken said.

Feeling obligated because her presence had caused a problem Shelly trailed by Jimmy climbed the stairs to the lofts.

A public area in the loft was filled with the tenants, many sitting on their own stools.

"What's this about you owning this building?" demanded Jessie. "I don't want you looking over my shoulder and hiking the rent."

"Who said I own the building?" Shelly asked.

"The police that were first on the scene," Gaylin answered.

"Who told them?"

Gaylin shrugged her shoulders. "They took long enough to get here. I called it in at 6:16am and they didn't show up till 9. By then everyone had trampled over whatever evidence there may have been." She glared at the others that lived on the premises.

"We didn't trample over any evidence. The cops did. Poking their noses into places Lazy and not accomplishing anything," Garrett accused.

"They should watch some cop shows for pointers," Larry said.

"So, what happened?" Shelly asked.

"It was two fucking people that came into the patio area. They had a fucking key and opened the door and fucking walked in," June, reported. "I watched them from my window." The U-shape of the building allowed the tenants on the second floor to see into the courtyard from one of their windows.

"Do you think it was the last person that used that studio?" Ken asked.

"Well, now, I hadn't thought of that. Roger and his girlfriend weren't happy about having to move, but they hadn't paid rent for two months and all he did was smoke weed and talk about ideas." Gaylin looked out the window for a few moments. "But Roger is in jail on a drug charge and his girlfriend is with that other artist, Juan something-or-other."

"Juan DeLone," Larry mimicked.

"You don't know what you're fucking talking about. That wasn't them," June said with certainty.

"Do you know Tommy?"

“It wasn’t fucking her,” June shook her head. “Tommy isn’t going to risk her fucking expensive ass in getting caught doing something that fucking dumb. Besides, she’s out screwing some new talent, Jen. The only reason she’d be out here is to check out the fucking competition. She comes by once a month with her latest when we have our monthly get-together.”

“When is that?”

“This evening. It’s the end of the month. We hand over our rent money to Gaylin and she takes our list of complaints or suggestions in fixing up this place and drops them in the fire,” Larry said.

“Why burn the suggestions?” Shelly asked.

“The smoke takes our wishes up to the fucking ethers,” June said. “Listen all, we need to make a fucking decision here.” She looked directly at Shelly. “We’re a peaceful community. If you bring any more of your fucking trouble here...”

“June, be still. You don’t speak for all of us. And you’re offending my ears. The agreement of the meetings is no cussing. Now, the last two people that left made everyone miserable for months before I asked them to leave and you weren’t saying anything then, so you have no right to complain now.”

“I don’t like the idea of a fucking rich landowner playing at her hobby while the rest of us...”

“I’m gone,” Shelly said. “This is full of crap.”

Shelly left the room with Jimmy close behind her. Ken remained behind but Shelly was too angry to care. Instead of leaving the building she returned to her art. Pulling out rebars she began to frame them with no clear idea. From her workbench, she added shapes she previously created to the frame. She worked into the next day.

Standing back to admire her work she decided the center should be a golden color, translucent. A glass ball would do the trick. She would stop at a store to get one.

“Don’t you get tired?”

Shelly turned to look at Gaylin. She had a tray with three cups of coffee and bagels. She set the tray down on the work bench and Jerry, her midnight to early morning bodyguard, took his coffee with lots of crème and sugar and declined the bagel.

“So, you have a short temper. I’ll remember that,” Gaylin said amicably.

“I have a low tolerance for small minds,” Shelly said.

“June’s parents pay for her to live here. I’ve never seen her do anything artistic since she’s been here. But she’s not into heavy drugs, and the only time she goes off on tangents is when we’re all together.”

“What does she do all day?”

“Goes to art school, or so she says,” Gaylin was studying Shelly’s work. “Looks promising.”

“Hi. Am I interrupting anything?” Ken asked. Larry and Junior followed him in.

“Hi, Ken. Were you able to get home okay?”

“Yes. Look when you get a chance, Mark Hightower needs to talk to you.”

“The bodyguard manager?”

Ken nodded. “I told him it was pretty stupid to not move in now since the other place is vacant and vulnerable for anyone that has a serious bent to get in. He needs to hear it from you.”

“Okay.”

“Since the end-of-month party didn’t happen last night, we’re having it tonight,” Gaylin said. “Everybody brings something. Why don’t you ask Lauren and Halley? Our parties are open house night. Everyone will have something of theirs showing in the courtyard...except June,” Gaylin said. “Lauren has been bugging me about coming over to work with you and since I don’t know your schedule...”

“Oh, right. I forgot. What day is today?”

“Friday,” they all chorused.

“You might want to add a landline in here if you don’t answer your cell,” Gaylin said.

“I like not being able to be disturbed when I’m working, but I didn’t realize they would bother you. Sorry about that,” Shelly told her.

“In this case, I happen to like Lauren. She’s one of those people that’s at that age where they can go this way or that.”

“Yeah. Art is a great opiate. I’ll ask Halley if tomorrow is alright,” she said.

“Okay, let’s go get something to bring then,” Ken said.

“Let me give you a list of what we usually bring and you can pick out what you want,” Gaylin said. She disappeared out the door while Larry and Junior looked at her finished work and the other pieces she was still working on.

“You’re no weekend hobbyist,” Larry said.

“Of course she’s not,” Ken said defensively. “I told you she’s legit.”

“Well, we’ve got our own work to get to. We just wanted to tell you that June’s nick name is June Bug because she gets a bug up her butt now and then and goes off on a rant. She’s harmless and just makes a lot of noise. We’re not asking you to leave and couldn’t anyway, if you own this place. Right?”

Shelly didn’t answer and Larry and Junior didn’t wait for one.

“How long is this adjustment period supposed to last?” She asked when the two were out of sight. “Do you like hanging out with artists, Ken?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. Larry was showing me how to design websites. It’s really interesting.”

“Hello?” a voice called from outside.

Ken opened the door to Shelly’s studio and waved to Anthony.

“Gaylin is planning on a Bar-B-Q for tonight. You want to come?” Shelly asked.

“Not tonight. *We* have a family meeting. I’ve been trying to reach you to tell you you’re expected to be there,” he said.

“Do I dress formally or in jeans?” she asked.

“Business-attire.”

“What time?”

“Six. Don’t be late.” He handed her the address.

“Business before pleasure,” Ken said. “I’ll be here. I’ll let you know how it is.”

Chapter 20

Anthony called her cell a few minutes before six letting her know he was arriving. Jimmy unlocked the gate and showed him inside the door. Shelly was taking one more

look at herself hoping she looked acceptable enough among her wealthy relatives. This was going to be her first official meeting. Anthony hadn't told her any specifics of the meeting so she had done a quick perusal of the book he gave her and thought if any questions were asked, she could comfortably say she didn't know for sure but...

Shelly picked up her coat and paused when her eyes fell on the suited person standing in the doorway. It wasn't the Anthony she knew. She stared at him trying to figure out just what it was that was different. He always looked like he stepped out of a fashion magazine, but this time it was more than the clothes and shiny shoes. Mentally she began to translate her impression in a metal sculpture, concluding it was attitude that was different.

"You're looking very Hayes ready," Anthony reassured her. "Shall we?" He offered his elbow and escorted her to a limousine. A driver was waiting outside of the vehicle. The driver opened the door for Anthony while Jimmy opened Shelly's door. The privacy window was rolled up making the smell of coffee strong in the back. Anthony handed a cup to Shelly before sipping from the second cup.

"I wanted to tell you more about the Hayes that wasn't in your book. The meeting is at one of the Hayes mansions, nicknamed the Castle because it's blocky and has a tower in the back."

"Who lives there?"

"CG and Grandmother Jenny, the permanent staff and their families and there's always visitors, guests from abroad, family members that stay overnight and ghosts," he said smiling.

"Family ghosts?" she asked.

"Some family and some not. Gregory visited the castle once, when he was six, and that was the last time." Anthony smirked. "He's a Bowers mama's boy."

"You scared him half to death with the ghost," Shelly guessed.

"I did."

"What about your mother?"

"Ashley." He looked thoughtful and she thought he gave a silent sigh. "She saw us as competition. Cathleen came along nine months after me, then Emily, and then Gregory, followed a few days after his birth with a divorce. She remarried the day the divorce was final to one of her lovers and then came Justin. It's amazing for someone that hated her children she liked being pregnant."

"Maybe she likes her hormones being out of whack. So how long did you live at the castle?" Shelly asked.

"For a while. I was home-schooled then went to a private school for two years, and on to college."

"How much of a shock is it to go from home schooling to a private school?"

"It was a learning experience but not in academics. Grandmother's teaching had them beat. I skimmed through classes."

"She taught school?"

"She was going to college to become a teacher when she met CG. They were attending adjoining colleges and met at a dance. They were in their early twenties and Grandfather wasn't in line of leading the family so there wasn't the usual pressure to marry from a specific family potential successors had to. The war broke out and grandfather enlisted at the college to join the military. He was sent to some undisclosed

location working for special operations. To hear him talk about it, he did a lot of hanging around doing nothing, but at the end of the war he was a captain so he must have been doing something. When he got back a schism within the family left no one acceptable to succeed PC Hayes. According to family gossip, PC's sons and the other young men along with some others aligned themselves with the Nazi's. Before you think that PC Hayes was noble to not back the Nazi's, the truth is, the Hayes hate the Bushes and since they supported the Nazi movement the Hayes traditionally chose not to.

"It was a family loyalty issue and CG was the one everyone picked out of a handful of young bucks. He was the only one that had military training, the only one with real college courses behind his belt, the only one settled down and married with children, and the only one that would rather not become the leader of the Hayes clan." Anthony laughed and for a few moments was quiet as he savored the retelling. "PC didn't have much time to teach him the responsibilities and rules since the unhappy dethroned Hayes were attempting to kill him. All the more reason to choose the next leader that knew something about warfare."

"Are you for real?" Shelly asked astonished.

"Yeah. You won't find that in the book I gave you. This is oral history. Anyway, when CG took over with Jenny, they changed a lot of things to reward the loyal cousins and give safety to their families from the dethroned Hayes."

"You know, this sounds like a mafia family...remember that movie?"

"It's not nearly as bloody, though people had accidents. Grandfather, grandmother and the newly seated board of trustees, came up with an idea to educate their children within a safe enclosure and thus came the Castle. It gave grandmother a chance to practice her ideas of teaching which encompassed teaching the children how to be prepared for real life responsibilities. When she thought a child was ready, he or she would spend two days every six months with different layers of Hayes management and then down into the workers level." He glanced over at Shelly. "Not your usual wealthy class home, is it? These days, not as many cousins want their kids to work so hard and grandmother isn't home schooling anymore."

"Do you love your mother?"

"No. I don't like her at all."

"Why do you call her mother then?" Shelly asked.

"It's just a reference. You think I should only call her Ashley?"

"I was curious why sometimes you call her mother and sometimes Ashley. You've made me realize how lucky I am. How come you didn't turn out crazy?" she added as an afterthought.

Anthony smiled. "Like I said. I was raised the Hayes way where you earn your place."

They drew up to a gilded gate with a big H in the center. Two guards were at the gate. After the driver popped the hood and truck and their car was inspected, they were allowed in.

The driver left them off at the elaborate walkway and drove off with Jimmy.

"You'll be okay here without your bodyguard. He'll meet back with you when you're ready to leave," Anthony explained.

It was a big house, four stories with plenty of square feet. They paused before walking up the steps so Shelly could take in the enormity of the house.

“It reminds me of those old mansions in England with patios and gardens just outside the French doors,” Shelly said in an undertone. “And there’s furniture on the patio...and its being used. What’s going on over there?” Shelly asked.

“That’s where bodyguards, personal secretaries, spouses, boyfriends, girlfriends...and one engaged nit wad wait while family members of the board attend to business.”

Anthony guided her by her elbow over the threshold, not giving her a chance to see what an engaged nit wad looked like. When they stepped over the threshold Shelly paused as her view was filled with ornate woodwork and an expansive fresco of deep space on the walls and ceiling. Shelly’s breath caught and she tried not to be noisy about her appreciation of the art work, her eyes busy moving from the carved wooden stair railing whose stairs went up into outer space with nebulas, stars, and spinning galaxies on the ceiling.

“The painting was added when grandfather took ownership of the house. He was a student of astronomy,” Anthony explained.

“Wow. All he needs now is an observatory and planetarium at the top of this castle.”

“He already does,” Anthony said.

“So how does it look?”

“Maybe one day grandfather will invite you for a show.”

“You haven’t seen it?”

“No. Few are invited.”

“Well, if he has enemies, that would be the place they would sabotage.”

“Sabotage?” Anthony looked at her startled. “What brought up sabotage?”

“I do have it on my mind. My studio was broke into early this morning and they damaged my equipment where only a close inspection would have found it.” She stopped and looked at him, allowing the fear she had previously been able to avoid to surface. “If I wasn’t so through in looking over my tools and equipment there’s no telling what would have happened if I turned on my torch. The hoist chain was also sawed through.”

Anthony’s face darkened and his mouth stretched into a grim line. “That is serious. It takes these attacks against you to another level.” He looked around for someone and not seeing what he was looking for guided her to another room. “It looks like the other meeting is still going on. Let’s go get some coffee.”

The sunlit room had its French doors open where people were milling around or gathered in small groups on the patio. Everyone seemed relaxed until Shelly caught sight of Ashley Sexton sitting in a chair against a wall with a man leaning down to listen to her. Whatever she was saying, her lips barely moved.

“Just how big is this family get-together?” Shelly whispered.

“Perhaps a dozen or more will be here.” Anthony’s faced creased into a smirk which he hid from Ashley by turning to Shelly. “Ashley and her personal secretary are here as requested. He won’t be going in. It’s going to prove interesting how she’s going to translate the meeting to him. Ashley doesn’t hear anyone, including herself.”

“So if your mother isn’t a Hayes anymore, what does grandfather have over her to make her come here?”

“I don’t know. CG is a man with deep connections.” Anthony sounded impressed.

The sound of a muffled bell came through the closed doors. The guard standing outside the doors opened them. A faint gray cloud whiffed out of the room. From where she was, Shelly could smell cigar smoke mixed with fresh air.

Anthony set his coffee cup down and Shelly followed suit. A dozen people that Shelly didn't see previously appeared from another room and went in the meeting room.

"Wait here a moment. It'll give the room a chance to air out." Anthony left her to speak with someone that was standing near the stairs. Shelly wondered if she was there to prevent people from going up stairs for their own tour.

He was back at her side and led her into the room. A chilly breeze blew in through the opened windows. An older man rose from his seat at the head of the table and came to greet her. Here was someone she had never met and more of him was reflected in her than her mother's side of the family. No wonder Anthony recognized her.

"Shelly, it's nice to meet you in person after all these years. I'm your grandfather, Clifford Hayes. Everyone calls me CG, or grandfather. Your mother was quite stubborn about our meeting, but she did have her reasons." Saying that his eyes moved to Anthony's mother who was escorted in. "Harry, seat Ashley. Please take this seat near me, Shelly. Anthony, sit next to her."

Anthony pulled Shelly's chair out for her and seated her then took his own chair.

"Everyone, please be seated," Harry said.

The men and women attending were dressed in business suits. Shelly felt relieved she had picked her clothing well.

"Ashley, sit down," CG Hayes commanded. His voice wasn't loud however; if he commanded her in that voice Shelly knew she would drop into the chair with knees shaking. Ashley Sexton sat down, her lips compressed in a thin angry line.

CG turned to Shelly. "I am officially recognizing you as my granddaughter, a legitimate Hayes and eldest child to Theo, legally known as Bartholomew Clifford Hayes. This gives her his voting privileges on matters that involve casting tie breakers." He looked at her and ordered, "Get your name legally changed back to your birth name, Shelly LeeAnn Hayes." He turned to Ashley Sexton. "Ashley, you and anyone that you've engaged, encouraged or directed in any way to do harm to a Hayes will stop immediately." He added when Ashley took a breath as if getting ready to say something, "There is nothing further to discuss on this topic." He looked around at all the people around the table then back at Ashley. "The Hayes family had formed a partnership with the Bower family in what has proven to be an unproductive investment, Hayes-Bower, LTD. It's time to dissolve the partnership."

"You can't dissolve it without calling the board together," Ashley said dismissively.

"I don't need the entire board to dissolve an unprofitable account. At the table are all the necessary votes I need. Twelve of twenty-four, two of three and one Bower representative. You're on the Bower Board." He smiled over at Shelly. Everyone looked at her. Not wanting to appear clueless, she smiled as charmingly as possible.

"All those in agreement raise your hand. Those opposed raise your hand. All but one vote for dissolution. The vote is for dissolution. We're withdrawing our assets and relinquishing what the Bowers had brought to the partnership. It's immediate. I'm sure you have phone calls to make, Ashley. Everyone may leave now but Shelly. Harry, see them out."

“Yes, Mr. Hayes.”

When the two were alone, Shelly studied her grandfather as he studied her.

“You have the look of a Hayes,” he commented. “The family has never produced any physical beauties, but brains – now there we’ve had a good run. We’ve made a few mistakes but all in all, we’re still a powerful force to reckon with and we have a fortune behind us. Stupidity, thank the gods, has not progressed beyond adolescent urges. We make our moves behind the scenes and stay out of the public’s eye.” His tone of voice didn’t sound like he expected her to say anything so she remained silent. He obviously had something more to say.

“Every organization has a leader. We have rules. Rules keep structure and power.” He gestured to the door with his cigar, “The ability to stop something that has been put in motion is what family power is about.” He puffed on his cigar for a few moments not taking his eyes off her.

“If you have any questions, ask Anthony. If he doesn’t know he will ask the proper people and give you an answer. This mess with Ashley – it was a mistake to think a marriage would undo ill will. Most unfortunate. Theo had better sense than us all. Your mother would have been a good addition to the Hayes household. Do you have anything to ask of me?”

“Yes. Someday could I see your planetarium?”

He smiled and puffed for a few moments filling his space with more smoke. “One of these days when both our calendars are free, I’ll show you. What is happening in that artist place you’re setup at?”

“Some people broke into my studio earlier this morning and sabotaged my equipment. The police came and went. I don’t understand why I’m being targeted.”

He waved his cigar that it was not a concern. “We’ll take care of that. Ken Smith seems to have good character.”

“I’ve asked him to be my roommate.”

“He won’t be going back to being a cop. Ashley took care of that.” He rolled his cigar in the ashtray breaking the ash off the tip of his cigar.

Shelly frowned at what that meant...she was responsible for Ken’s embarrassment with his department. “He’s been a good friend to mom and I,” Shelly said softly. “I hope we both survive this life adjustment.” Shelly worried that she was taking the easy way out and letting someone else handle her problems.

“It’ll workout,” Grandfather Hayes said, as if reading her thoughts. “How’s your beach house shaping up?”

“All our belongings are moved in. Security wants us to wait until they finalize the security system but...” She grinned as she remembered she and Ken had already made up their minds to sleep there regardless of not having an alarm setup. The house she was moving out didn’t have much security. “I doubt we’ll wait. It’s a beautiful place and within walking distance to my studio.”

Grandfather Hayes eyes narrowed and then he nodded. “Better there than that place in Venice Beach. Have a nice evening. When you leave, send Harry in.”

“Yes, sir. Good evening.” Shelly left the room careful not to take any deep breaths. A cloud of cigar smoke seemed to cling to her as she opened the door. Harry was at the door and didn’t need to be told that Mr. Hayes wanted to see him.

Shelly stepped outside and took a deep breath of fresh air.

“You had a private meeting with CG,” Anthony said amused. “Did you ask him anything? He always asks, do you have anything to ask me?”

“I asked if I could see his planetarium.”

“What did he say?”

“One of these days when both our calendars are free. . . .”

“He’s not joking. His days and most evenings are full. I spent a week with him and was tired on the second day.” He grinned. “It was the one hour on the tread mill that nearly killed me.”

Shelly laughed.

“So, where are you staying these days? I tried your place on the beach and cell phone and couldn’t reach you,” Anthony said.

Shelly pulled out her cell phone and turned it on...or tried. “I think I forgot to recharge this. Our new beach house. That’s where all our belongings are.”

Shelly climbed into the limo with her Jimmy sitting in the front. “So where do you want me to drop you?” he asked.

“My new home. I would like to change clothes before going over to The Artists Barn. They’re having a party tonight and I wanted to check my studio.”

The limo pulled into her driveway. The four of them got out of the limo. While the limo driver stood outside of the car, Jimmy led them down the stairs and to the patio entrance. A security guard came out of the shadows from the neighboring house that still had construction going on.

“Mr. Hayes and Ms. Abbot.” The guard nodded at Jimmy.

“Anyone nosing around?” Jimmy asked.

“No. I think they’re more interested in the party that’s going on down the road. A couple of movie stars are there and along with them the paparazzi.”

“Come on. Let’s get inside. It’s freezing out here,” Shelly said.

“Ms. Abbott, Mr. CG Hayes had your security system installed an hour ago. The code is waiting for you to put in.”

Shelly looked at Anthony. “He had to have called before the meeting.”

“Gaylin Howell must have called Parker about your studio break in and they ordered it put in right away,” Anthony said.

Setting the up the security made no sense to Shelly. Jimmy explained it twice and when he thought she understood waited patiently as she came up with a pass code. She was too tired to figure anything complicated and hoped she remembered it the next time she had to use it. Shelly plopped down on the couch that faced the bay window.

“That aquarium is really nice. There’s no fish,” Anthony said.

“I think this weekend Ken’s buying all the things that go in there. I can’t wait. When I first met him he had a small one in his front room. It was beautiful. And this,” Shelly gestured to the view of the ocean that was too dark outside to see, “is beautiful too.”

“How about something to eat. I know a great restaurant that delivers.”

“Sounds good,” Shelly agreed. “Jimmy? Are you hungry?”

“I have a power bar here,” he said, patting his pocket. Jimmy was a health enthusiast that worked out and snacked on power bars.

“Please, Jimmy. Have something more substantial,” Shelly said.

“Whatever you think is best, Ms. Abbot.”

“Anthony, can you order for us? Something healthy for Jimmy so he won’t hate himself the next day. I’m too tired to figure out what I want.”

Anthony tapped a number on his phone. “I got it covered.”

Whatever he ordered was in Italian and the person he spoke to he was familiar with because he rolled his r’s and laughed with the female voice on the other end.

“We’ll have dinner in about an hour,” Anthony said.

“Let me take you on a tour then. You can help me make my bed. I haven’t had a chance to do that.”

Chapter 21

Two Weeks Later

Unable to sleep finally got Shelly up and pacing in her bedroom. It was too cold to stand on the balcony. Unable to stand the confines of her room any longer, she moved to the spacious downstairs. The kitchen was dark and deserted, and her second shift bodyguard, Jerry moved in the front room to let her know where he was. She waved to him and after walking around the room sat in the chair that faced the window to collect her thoughts. Ken was out with a date so there was little chance of her waking him. She wanted someone to talk to and the fact that it was a family matter, something not to be discussed outside of the Hayes family narrowed her accepted listeners down to one, Anthony. However, it was too late at night to speak with him.

Shelly drew her legs under her, wrapping her arms around a fat pillow, feeling ensconced in the embrace of the chair. Sitting in the dark and staring out the bay window, pinpoints of lights against a black background was all there was beyond her glass protection. She hugged the pillow tighter. She had always been an outsider seeking the company of others when she wanted a break from her art, like a whale coming up for air. Right now, she felt like the whale that breached, finding it landed in unfamiliar waters. LeeAnn filtered the world for her as she focused on *her* passion. Now she had enough money to hire other people to keep the unpleasant things at arms length or hidden from her sight. Even her participation in the local Habitat for Humanity meetings she avoided the recruitment to sit on any boards’ people with money seemed to be targeted for. Was that a pitiful display of her responsibility to the community she belonged to? Why was she in avoidance of anything that required more of her attention and time away from her art? It’s not like she was overwhelmed with deadlines on her art projects nor was she bored or finding blocks of empty time with nothing to do. What she needed to do was balance her time with things for her and things with others. She nodded to herself. Isolation was not good for her mentally. It was something her mother often said. Maybe it was time to get a personal secretary, like Anthony’s. Ken had encouraged her to try one to see if it worked out.

Shelly rubbed her head as if that would help wipe out worrisome thoughts. Her eyes fell on the ring Ken bought her on his trip to Hawai’i. Her lips curled up in a smile as she thought of Ken’s inheritance from her mother. Two million dollars. Ken mentioned it in an off-hand manner, letting her know that he wasn’t under any pressure to stay or leave. What was there to say except thank you for being her roommate?

Ruefully she shook her head. She hated this time of the month where she became so emotionally clingy and insecure. Doubts of everything and everyone clung to what her senses translated of the world around her.

Ken didn't give her the impression that he felt uncomfortable with living with her. When they had differences they talked about it and worked something out. She felt comfortable with Ken, but they seldom saw each other so maybe that was what made their living arrangement work. Her head turned to stare at the 45 gallon saltwater tank. Before going to bed she found herself sitting and watching the colorful schools of fish move through the coral. She was thinking of adding a tank to her bedroom. It certainly was large enough.

A buzz of her cell had her rising from the chair. Her cell was in its charging station on the entrance table.

Glancing at the number she could see Anthony's name. "Hi," she said.

"Did I wake you?" he asked.

"No."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"How did you know I wanted to talk about something?"

"You're easy to read. I thought by now if you hadn't called me, I should find out how you're doing. I'm about thirty minutes from your place. Can you hold the questions until then?" he asked.

"Do you ever go to bed?" she asked.

"I don't usually close bars, but I couldn't sleep either. I thought I would go trolling for company. Instead I found I would rather talk with someone that doesn't have an ax to grind or isn't drunk and falling over."

It sounded like he was walking as he spoke. He gave directions to someone and a car door closed. It was probably his bodyguard. Since the Hayes and Bower partnership was no more, his vehicle when parked in public was getting vandalized. He didn't want to wait for it to turn to personal attacks so he hired bodyguards. Anthony saw it as something Justin and Gregory would do at the instigation of Ashley via Cathleen, her agent so-to-speak.

"Would you like something to drink, coffee or tea?" Shelly asked.

"No. Are you alone?"

"Jerry is here."

"Ken's not around?"

"He's on a date. Is there a reason you want to know?"

"The fewer ears around the better a private conversation is kept private."

"Okay. I'll see you soon."

Shelly went upstairs to dress, thinking of going to her studio after Anthony left. She was too wound up to sleep. It didn't seem like thirty minutes but the alarm went off letting her know that someone was parking on her driveway. The bell at the gate rang. She got up to look on the security monitor, knowing that was something Jerry could do. He got up and went out to the patio to let them through the gate.

She slid her hands in her pocket and found her cell phone in one. Unconsciously, she took the keys off the hook and added them to her pocket. She didn't expect the conversation to last long and she wanted to do some work. While she waited, she

considered the change in her at how easy it was to order people around. "I do pay them a salary to work for me," she muttered to herself. "I shouldn't feel guilty."

Anthony rapped a few times on the door. Jerry stood beside him and opened the door for him. They both waited for Jerry to shut the door and leave them to their conversation.

"So, what's keeping you awake?" Anthony said. He handed his coat to Shelly who hung it in the hall closet.

"Grandfather ordered me to vote his way. I just don't feel right about voting the way he's telling me to."

"Maybe he suspects he knows more of the business than you. You're a tie breaker not someone that partakes regularly in the business of the company. Tie breakers usually side with the Chairman of the Board, that being grandfather."

"Is Joe the Lip Splitter and his partner Joe the Leg Breaker going to pay me a visit if I don't vote his way?"

"Do you have an army of advisers on monetary matters that you can ask questions of?"

"I don't need them to see what's going on."

"What you see on deck isn't what's going on below decks, as grandmother would say. Why don't you want to vote for his side?"

"Because I think it's a mistake."

"Did you tell him and provide the reasons?"

"Yes."

"Then you made your voice heard and now vote as he suggests. He knows more of what's going on at all levels than you and I would."

Shelly looked guilty. "I asked someone some questions and I was told it would fail."

"So?" Anthony said.

"What?"

"Whether it succeeds or fails isn't the whole picture. There are consequences however you vote."

"I personally think we should get out of being traded on the stock market."

"Then why are you so against voting CG's way?" Shelly looked at him blankly. "The vote is to buy up public held stocks in the family's interests."

"I thought it was to use up family funds to back our...oh!"

Shelly rubbed her head with her knuckles. "I should have seen that."

They both were silent for a few moments, listening to the wind blowing on the outside. It was louder than usual.

"It sounds like a window is open. After that attack on you you shouldn't leave windows open, even if you have a bodyguard," Anthony said.

"I know that. I didn't open one," Shelly said. She sniffed the air. "It's the kitchen window. I recognize the scent of herbs on that side of the building. It couldn't have been open long or I would have noticed." Shelly rose from her chair concerned and started to go into the kitchen when Anthony pulled her toward the front door. In the wind protected area of the sunken patio, Jerry and Bob stood huddled in their coats.

"We have an open window," Anthony said softly.

The two men were immediately at his side. Tommy pulled a phone from his pocket. Shelly and Anthony were quickly hustled away from the house, down the stairs onto the beach. It was cold and windy, with the sand biting exposed skin. Shelly was pressed against the building's foundation.

"What's happening?" Shelly asked in a whisper.

Anthony motioned for her to be silent. Tommy came down the stairs, handing Shelly her thick warm coat and Anthony his. Bob was close behind him.

"Where's Jerry?" Shelly asked concerned.

"It's shift change. Someone must be keeping track of our times. Jerry will stay here until the sweep team comes in. We're going to do something unusual. We'll walk you over to your art studio. They have adequate security there until we can get your house and car checked out," he said. "Better to be over cautious," he added.

"I appreciate it," Shelly said.

"Me too," Anthony said.

Leaning in the wind Shelly followed Tommy as he led them up the public stairs six houses down the beach. There wasn't any problem on their thirty-minute walk to the art studio. One of the new security features on the studio doors was when a door was opened it turned a light on in the manager's residence. When the code was typed in it cleared the alarm light on Gaylin's security panel. It could give Gaylin a headache if the artist forgot his or her password but no one forgot there was an alarm because a brush with cranky police reinforced the security agreement they all signed when the installation went in.

Shelly unlocked her door, keyed in her code and the ritual began. Tommy and Bob inspected the interior while Shelly and Anthony waited in the sheltered entry way. Tommy looked over her equipment and the repaired hoist chain. Once the studio was cleared, Tommy and Bob took up different posts in the studio. It was early in the morning and Max barked a few times. Shelly softly called to Max and after a few more barks there was silence. To warm them up after the chilly walk she boiled water for tea and made coffee for anyone that would rather it. Anthony walked around the studio, inspecting the four pieces that were in various stages of completion. On her work table were dozens of smaller forms being created. In deep drawers were creations she had completed and were just waiting for a sculpture to be created for them and the motors a friend put together. Shelly glanced at him wondering if he would like the one she did of her impression of him when he was dressed up.

"What are we going to do here?" Shelly asked Tommy.

"Wait until your place is cleared. Jerry said there was no open window when he last inspected it at midnight. Mr. Hayes said you didn't open one and Mr. Smith hasn't returned so we need to find the cause of the open window and make sure nothing was sent through the window."

"It had to have been opened while our attention was on Anthony's arrival," Shelly said.

"My concern is that the security setup didn't alert us that someone approached your property and opened a window," Tommy explained. "It means we have a security failure. The reputation of the company is on the line with Mr. CG Hayes."

Tommy and Bob took posts near the door where one could look out the window and the other watch the door. Shelly and Anthony sat on the couch waiting for the water to boil and coffee to drip.

“Do you think it’s the Bower’s or your mother’s doing – the break in?” Shelly asked Anthony softly.

“I don’t know.”

“This really ticks me off,” Shelly said. “How can I enjoy my new place if I have to keep worrying about the fleas in the mattress?”

“Does it tick you off enough to take classes in self-defense?” Anthony asked.

“Mother already had me take one as a condition that she wouldn’t worry me with daily phone calls when I first moved out. Every year I take a refresher and get my butt kicked by tough cookies that are older than me.”

“This will be the next class up from 101 and it won’t be a weekend workshop,” Anthony said. “I’ll get you the information.”

“Okay.” Shelly’s cell rang. “Hello?... Hi, Ken. What’s up?... Well, yeah there may have been a break in. The house is being gone over now.... The car?” Shelly caught Bob’s nod. “It’s being looked at too. I’m all right. I’m with Anthony and our bodyguards.”

After reassuring Ken that everything was in hand they disconnected.

“How did he know?” Shelly asked Tommy.

“When the security company puts out an alarm for a sweeper all those involved with your house protection will be notified and that it’s under control,” Tommy said.

“So, whoever opened the window will know too.”

“Maybe...probably,” Tommy said.

“How many people knew that Ken wasn’t going to be at the beach house tonight?” Anthony asked.

“I don’t know. I didn’t until he called.”

“He has his own money. Why is he staying with you?” Anthony asked.

“Because I asked him to. He’s a friend and part of *my* family, Anthony.”

“Right now, I think he’s a risk.”

“I trust Ken with my life.”

“His choice in boy-friends is what’s in question here.”

“Are you saying Ken’s pillow talk is giving the security code away?” Shelly asked incredulously. “He’s not stupidly infatuated with Mata Hari, though I think a male exotic dancer would have some effect on him. We’ve had no problems for a while. How about instead, someone has been studying our habits waiting for a time to hit the place or maybe all this is just a test for the big one?” Though she said it in a mocking tone, she was serious.

“What about your maid?” Anthony asked.

“It’s a guy cleared by the security company. Did you learn all this in this self-defense class?”

“Yes.” Anthony frowned for a moment and then said, “You’re trying to keep yourself safe from the world by immersing yourself in your art. Burying yourself in ignorance won’t protect you. It leaves you vulnerable.”

“My money is on the cleaning guy,” Shelly said.

“Why?”

“Maybe he’s being paid minimum wage and wants to steal my jewels.” Embarrassed by her accusation she added quickly, “I feel uncomfortable with him around. I feel like he’s always staring at me.”

“Let him go. Find someone else.”

“What’s he going to do for a job?”

“Find another job that he can make someone uncomfortable about. Where’s he from?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t talk to me. I don’t know if he speaks English, but he’s not Spanish.”

“Why are you keeping him around?”

“He does his job extremely well. No one cleans a house where everything shines like new.”

“Everything you have is new.”

“I think he’s obsessive about cleaning and maybe he doesn’t like seeing me put a glass down on a table he just cleaned or something. I’m not sure how to tell him to stop staring at me but I don’t like strangers in my house so I don’t want to leave him alone. You don’t think he’s from one of those countries where women aren’t supposed to speak to men do you?”

Anthony laughed. “As in his being a radical Islamic? I don’t think so. With the fear of terrorism, I think the probability of him getting a job inside people’s homes is unlikely. Who hired him?”

“I would have to ask Alan Conley. Doesn’t the company screen people before they send them over to their expensive clients?”

“To protect their reputation and insurance coverage, I would hope so. What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. He mumbled it and after a few times I stopped asking.” Shelly sighed. “Okay, so I need to be more active in whom I hire. I just find it hard to get by the pleading eyes of please give me a job.”

“We all have to start somewhere. I hear practice makes perfect. Speaking of jewelry, I seldom see you wear any. I didn’t think you had any.” He smiled to lighten the comment. “Is that ring new?”

“I have jewelry and I’ve inherited a few things from mother, but this isn’t one of them.” She removed the ring and handed it to Anthony.

“And keep it in a safety deposit box, no doubt.”

“How did you know?”

“I don’t see you as the type to hide things in a wall or floor safe. But you may keep the key in a safe. Am I right?” he asked mocking.

“No. I keep it on me.” Shelly pulled out her key ring. The key in question was missing. “Damn.” For a long moment, she thought back to the last time she remembered looking at it on her key ring but couldn’t. The only thing certain was when she last used it. “The last time I was at the bank box was six weeks ago. I’ll call the bank and let them know I’m missing my key. It’s kind of difficult to believe it fell off the key ring...but who would steal a safe deposit box key when the two clerks know everyone who has a box there.” Shelly frowned as her active imagination thought of an elaborate way to get around the two guardians of the safe deposit boxes.

“Just what does LeeAnn have in the safe deposit box that would interest people?” Anthony asked.

Shelly got up to turn the boiling water off. She poured coffee in three cups and water in one and handed them around. She resettled on the couch next to Anthony.

“Jewelry and papers.”

“What’s in the papers?” He asked curious.

“My pedigree, letters, newspaper clippings and other stuff. There’s nothing there that isn’t copied and stored somewhere else.” She thought of the jewelry her mother left her. It was worth a fortune according to the insurance papers.

“Maybe it’s the jewelry then.”

“You’re making the assumption someone stole the key,” Shelly said. She looked at her key ring again. It couldn’t have fallen off. When was the last time the keys were out of sight?

“Yes, and you should too. Do you know the value of the jewelry? Why would someone want the key?” Anthony worried. “There are too many personal attacks against you.”

“The jewelry is worth a lot. There’s mother’s wedding ring, and five other rings that are too rich for me to walk around wearing, necklaces with ear rings to match and ... What?”

“A wedding ring?” he asked softly. Anthony’s nostrils flared and he leaned toward Shelly.

“Yeah... your mother wouldn’t be so low as to try and steal that, would she?”

“Does it have a design like this?” He showed her a design on a pinkie ring he wore.

“Yes. Is it a Hayes family heirloom?” she joked.

Anthony laughed relieved. “It’s *the* family heirloom. No one knew what happened to it. If you ever remove it from the safety deposit box, make sure you have an armed guard. There are people that want that ring badly. Does anyone know you have it?”

“The Parkers have an inventory of mother’s jewelry since it was insured through them. Should I give it back? I mean, I don’t intend on having kids so there’s no one to pass it to.”

Anthony looked surprised.

“As a Hayes’ heirloom, I need to pass it on to someone that feels like a Hayes, Anthony. Do you want it?”

He laughed nervously. “No. Besides having every woman under the sun throwing themselves at me, that’s not the way it’s passed on.”

Shelly wondered what Hayes bugaboo she stepped on.

“Why would anyone know? Does your mother have your safe number?” Shelly found it difficult to believe that Anthony wouldn’t take something he felt was so important to his family.

“Mine is a biolock. Hand scan,” Anthony said.

“That’s not too safe. Someone could cut your hand off and place it on the scanner,” Shelly said.

“I think grandfather would be the appropriate person to give the ring to. He was the holder before father. He also has better security.” Anthony’s voice sound more

confident and relieved at suggestion. Shelly's curiosity at the ring's importance was piqued.

"Why not grandmother? Shouldn't she be wearing it?"

"She would like that, I'm sure. It's handed over to the eldest son for his wife to wear. It's an heirloom that doesn't leave the Hayes family."

Shelly leaned close to him wondering if he was going to cry. "I guess then, if my mother and...err... Theo is it? had another child and it was male it would go to that child. It would have gone to you then. Does that mean that you're to follow grandfather in leadership of the family?"

"Maybe. When grandfather thinks I'm ready, he'll present me to the board and everyone votes. I have a lot to learn still."

"Is that why you were given me to handle?"

Anthony laughed. "I would hardly call teaching you the ropes of being a Hayes is handling you. Do you feel like you're being handled?"

"Sometimes."

"How are you doing with reading your Hayes Handbook?" he asked.

"It's not the most interesting read once I get past the His story, which doesn't mention a ring. So, how do we go about handing over the ring to grandmother?" Shelly asked.

"We? Well, she's been away for a while, taking care of her sister. I think she and grandfather had a disagreement so grandmother took off to Hawai'i to get some space, using her sister as an excuse."

"I wouldn't mind flying to Hawai'i to give the ring to her but there's no Charlie Chan to protect the diamond."

"My suggestion is let grandfather and his security worry about its safety. I'm serious when I say, that ring is very important to the family. Someone must know what's in your safe deposit box because your key is missing."

"Okay. I picked up on that. I'll need to go to the bank when it opens... I couldn't get grandfather to take it then, could I? Now that I know how important it is, I'd like to hand it off to someone else."

Anthony stared at his hands for a few moments. He flipped open his cell and made a call.

"Good morning, Mr. H. Shelly wants to give a ring to CG but will need additional protection to remove it from her safe deposit box, hopefully this morning." He listened for a long time before handing his cell to Shelly.

"This is Harry, Mr. H. He's grandfather's secretary. Tell him the name of the bank and address and the time it opens if you know it. He will have people there when you arrive to remove it."

"Hello, this is Shelly... Yes, sir. Anthony said it was a family heirloom. I would like to give it back to Grandmother Hayes."

Shelly gave him the address of the bank and a guess at the time the bank opened. After hanging up, Shelly was too restless to just sit and talk.

"I hope you don't mind if I work."

"No, I don't mind at all. I'd like to see how you do the moving parts, if you don't mind me watching."

"Well, you're here at a good time then," Shelly said.

She went to the cupboard and dressed in her coveralls and apron. She pulled out the tools she would need and from the drawers she picked through the small objects she had wielded together previously to attach to sculptures. With the ring on her mind, the objects she pulled were things that could mimic symbols of importance.

“Do you want to help?” she asked Anthony. From the shelves, she selected a helmet that had flames painted on it, a respirator, and gloves and handed him them. For herself, her helmet was red with no decorations.

“Okay, now what?” he asked.

“Okay, hold this in here.” She gave Anthony the elongated pliers that held a mechanical metal bird she had put together and positioned it inside the steel skeleton. In her mind’s eye, the partial person she had welded together with rebars was going to be many women, and all with rings on their fingers extended to the next generation.

Anthony watched her, fascinated at how fast she worked and how much grunt work went into bending metal, cutting, and fitting parts together that were never meant to be together in this life.

The morning light filtering through the windows was unseen by Shelly as she worked. Anthony had returned to the couch to watch, sipping freshly brewed coffee. The light flashed that the door was opening. Though Shelly knew she wasn’t alone, it didn’t prevent her from turning quickly, worried that she may have to duck.

Standing in the doorway was Grandfather Hayes, Mr. H, and two bodyguards. They were all dressed in business suits.

“Good morning, Grandfather,” Anthony said with a grin. “You’re up early.”

“You look like you’ve been up all night, Anthony,” he said.

“We have. There was a little bit of trouble at Shelly’s house. Someone may have stolen her safe deposit box key.”

He nodded and walked around Shelly’s sculpture.

“What do you call this?”

“I haven’t gotten to a name.” *The Ring Barers*, she thought then. Shelly turned one of the parts and the metal bird came out, flapping metal wings.

“What do you think Harry?”

“I think for those that like to touch things that aren’t theirs, it would be a nice if it could bite.”

“I have one of hers that shoots water at the person touching a part,” Anthony said.

“Are you finished with this?” Grandfather Hayes asked.

“No. I’m still working on it.”

“When you’re finished, I would like to purchase it.” He pursed his lips as he stared at it, his brow wrinkled in thought. “If you don’t sacrifice something, you can’t experience life,” Grandfather said softly.

Shelly was surprised he would say something like that, or that that was what he got from the sculpture. What was sacrifice to him?

Anthony grinned at Shelly. “Father used to say Adversity awakens the creative in you and the will to seek what is beyond your horizon.”

“I like mother’s better, Seek and you shall find, so beware of what you seek,” Shelly said.

“She was a shrewd one,” Grandfather Hayes said. He patted his pocket as if looking for a cigar.

“So, we’re all going to the bank and safe deposit box?” Shelly asked.

“Do you know what the ring is worth?” Grandfather asked her.

“A family heirloom to the Hayes is probably as valuable as a Chinese chop,” Shelly said. “Priceless and vitally important.”

“Chop?” Anthony said.

“It’s a seal. It’s as good as giving the owner’s word that what the stamp is on is vouched for by the owner of the chop.”

“Are you going to the bank like that?” Grandfather Hayes asked Shelly.

“I can go home, shower and change.”

“Has the house been cleared?” He asked Henry.

“Add security is being installed,” Henry said.

By the time they got to the bank, it was two hours before opening but the manager of the bank was there and let them in.

Because Shelly didn’t have her key, they needed a special locksmith to open the safe deposit box who arrived soon after they did. When it was opened, Shelly picked out the velvet box.

“That’s the ring box,” Grandfather Hayes said.

Shelly handed it to him and he opened it up.

“It’s beautiful,” Anthony said in awe. “I’ve only seen pictures of it,” he told Shelly.

It was too big and gaudy to Shelly.

“I had thought it lost,” Grandfather Hayes said.

“I’m sure Grandmother Hayes will like to wear it again,” Shelly said.

He nodded as he closed the case and slipped it in his pocket. While Grandfather Hayes and his retinue left Anthony stayed with her while she arranged for a new box with a key.

“This key will be worn around my neck,” she told Anthony as they slid in the backseat. The two bodyguards sat up front.

Anthony leaned back in the back seat with his eyes closed. He looked exhausted. Shelly felt tired too.

“I think the Spring Dinner will be grandmother’s showing everyone that the ring is back in the family. And Gregory, faithful to Ashley, will report back to her and if he can, take a picture of it.” He sighed. “Life is never dull.”

He then chuckled, “That was the biggest problem between father and Ashley. She wanted the family ring. And no wonder she didn’t find it.”

Chapter 22

6 Months Later

Shelly waved at Ken as she parked her Jag next to his silver Mercedes, a convertible SL.

“You look so GQ, Ken,” she said.

“Good evening, Shelly. I have some bad news.” Ken dropped his backpack on the passenger seat in the convertible and leaned down to get a better look at Shelly’s face.

“How did you get that bruise?”

“I was distracted in self-defense class. What’s the bad news?”

“I’m going to miss your birthday bash tonight. I’m working on a case.”

“No problem. It means I get two parties. My birthday wish is a Bar-B-Q from you. It’s amazing that you can’t do much at a stove but you do wonders over a fire.”

“It’s a boy-thing.”

Ken was helping out a friend with his private detective business. Since he didn’t have to work for a living, Ken was trying out different things. His interest in designing web sites hadn’t completely disappeared, but it wasn’t something he wanted to occupy his whole day to, no more than sitting for hours on a stake out.

He gave her a hug. “I’ll do that. Oh, by the way, Hank, the saltwater fish tank guy, recommended we move the tank to the wall where our hall table is. He said if we have parties, guests get careless and either drop something in the tank or crash into it.”

“You plan on having a party?”

“Not today or tomorrow, but what about your friends coming to your Bar-B-Q?”

“He’s right. I worry the couch will knock it over.”

“I made Friday the day he’ll be back to help me move it. It’s a big production.”

“I can imagine. Okay. Do you want me there to help?” Shelly asked.

“We’ll need all the help we can get,” Ken said. “We’ll need to move the fish into containers and empty most of the water.”

“I’ll be here.”

“Okay. Bye,” he kissed her on the cheek. “That’s from Rhonda.”

Shelly smiled. Ken’s private detective friend had a five-year-old daughter who was fascinated with Shelly. She thought it was because they had picked her up at her studio once and Shelly had been in the middle of a project dressed for work— blow torch, bright red helmet, and heavy apron on. Rhonda, instead of being frightened, was in awe as she found a woman was inside all the protective gear.

“I’ll catch you later.” Shelly waved as he pulled out and took off on PCH.

She grabbed her gym bag from the trunk and watched the garage door close. Though Meriner her bodyguard was with her, she liked practicing the good habits of self-protection. She unlocked the door to the service door and waited for Meriner to go before her.

“Meriner, what do you plan on wearing or is Jimmy taking over?” Shelly asked.

“I’ll start off. I’m doing basic black with the pretty company logo.” he said mockingly.

“Basic black. You’re the right size to intimidate any stranger from approaching me and giving me a birthday smooch,” Shelly said. “That’s good. No birthday smooches. Some of those people that show up at the once a month bashes I wouldn’t want to shake hands with. I asked Anthony’s advice on how to have a problem free party. I like his parties because even when there are problem guests, it’s all handled with little fuss and other guests don’t feel put out. I’d hate to have you rip a coat while roughing up a patrician.”

“Darn. They’re just the people I like to stand in front of when they’re too drunk to know they’re being a-holes.”

“You are like a rock wall. Just be careful one doesn’t think to bring a knife to get by you.”

However, all her bodyguards wore body armor to ease her mind. After watching the introductory picture the self-protection class gave, Shelly realized this was not the usual public parks class she attended in the past.

“If you want to stay longer at the party once you’re off duty, you’re welcome,” Shelly said.

“Thanks for the invite,” he said.

On the hall credenza, a basket that was where her mail was dumped was full. As Ken had told her, since the house was in her name, it was only right that she should get the junk mail. Going through this was where she thought a personal secretary would earn big points with her. The last time she threw everything out turned out that one skinny envelope was an official letter from Parker.

One envelope she picked up and turned over to see where it was coming from. Not recognizing the handwriting or finding a return address she tossed it in the trash next to the credenza. After chucking the last advertisement into the trash, she gave a longing look at the deck she would rather sit on.

Running up the stairs she mentally began her preparation for the gathering. The people she knew were going to be there were her fellow artists and their family and friends from the warehouse, Seandee, Halley, and Lauren. She asked for a small party and Gaylin assured her since it was her party she would see to keeping it tame. The clothes she was wearing were jeans, her steel tipped toed shoes and a T-shirt. Her jean jacket finished off party attire. Since usually during these parties she ate and then retired to her studio to work, she didn’t think this would be any different.

Shelly’s cell phone vibrated on her hip. “Hello?”

“*Your chauffeur has arrived,*” Halley announced. “*Is Birthday Girl ready?*”

“We’ll be right out,” Shelly said. “Come on Meriner. Our ride is here.”

The black limousine was parked with the engine running and the woman driver holding a door open for her. Lauren and Halley were sitting in the back. Shelly had ordered the limousine so that no one had to worry about parking but the chauffeur.

“We’re all dressed in black. If everyone’s dressed in black at your party, will that be a bad omen?” Lauren asked.

“Gaylin doesn’t dress in black,” Halley said. “When we passed by, I noticed parking was already filling up. I thought we were going to be early.”

“I’ve never had a birthday party of more than five people.”

“You’re not much of a party goer,” Halley said.

“Not really.”

“Why are you having this party then?” Lauren asked.

“Two reasons: My fellow barn artists love parties and my mother would be disappointed in me if I didn’t learn to be more social. I hope this isn’t going to be a party that ends up with the police coming out. I worry about the party crashers that will find this difficult to pass up.”

“You’re paying for the extra protection at the party. I think everyone is curious how that’s going to turn out,” Halley said. “One person you don’t have to worry about is Eric. He’s in Europe with his mother.”

“Carolyn said if he didn’t go, his mother wouldn’t give him any more money,” Lauren offered.

“Who is Carolyn?” Shelly asked.

“Our hairdresser,” Lauren said.

“Ken told me he was independently wealthy,” Shelly said.

“He could have been that for life if he listened to his accountant,” Halley said.

“He gambles, drinks and buys...” she looked over at her mother. Her expression elicited a smirk from Lauren followed by humming.

“So Lauren, what’s your next project?” Shelly asked.

“Are you going to talk about art on your birthday?” Halley asked.

“Oh, mother,” Lauren said.

Halley smiled showing it was said in jest. She looked over at Shelly. “That’s all she talks about on the phone, in the car, when she’s visiting grandfather...”

“That’s not all I talk about,” Lauren said.

The limo stopped in front of #5. Jimmy was out of the car and looked around while Jenny the driver went around and opened the doors for everyone. The party was already underway. The small fairy lights and larger flower lights were shining from the patio overhangs and trellises that were added to the patio. Smoke from the grills gave them a hint of what was being grilled and it just wasn’t meat.

“Smells like fish in lemon grass,” Halley said.

Gaylin waved at them and wove her way through the revelers. She laid a hand on Shelly’s arms. “Happy Birthday, Shelly,” followed by a kiss on each cheek.

“Hi, Gaylin. I’m glad it’s already started,” Shelly said.

“Hello, Halley-Lauren. Lauren, your sculpture and woven wall hanging we’d like to have it out on the patio at our next month-end party, provided you don’t sell them before then. Since you produced them here, that means you’re one of us.”

Lauren beamed at her.

“Shelly, I’d like to speak with you before you join the party. I invited some friends of yours when you were working for Holbart Industries. It was supposed to be a surprise, but I was thinking a little longer about it and thought there might be a reason why you haven’t kept in touch with them.”

“There was. But that’s okay. I can always leave.” Shelly couldn’t think of anyone from HI that would be interested in her life.

Jimmy, her next shift bodyguard was standing near the entrance.

“Did you get a chance to eat?” Shelly asked him.

“Ms. Howell made sure I had something before I started work. Thanks. I’ll relieve Meriner now so he can try the grilled chicken and potato salad before it’s gone.”

Meriner sniffed the air hungrily. “That smells good. Thanks. You have a nice party Ms. Hayes.”

“Thanks, Meriner.”

“Hey, Shelly! Miss Money Bags herself!” Joyce Kelly and eight others from HI came down the stairs.

Shelly thought that so far the surprise reunion didn’t hurt.

“Gods, girl. We didn’t know you were rich. Imagine that.”

“I wasn’t rich when I worked for HI,” Shelly said. “So, what brings you all here?” she asked, forgetting the reason.

“Your party,” Joyce said incredulously. “You do know that this is your birthday party, right? I didn’t spill the beans or anything, did I?” Joyce looked around at the others with a smirk.

“Hi, Shelly,” John said.

“Hi, John.” Shelly gave him a hug. He really was the only one she liked at HI. “So, how are you doing?” she asked.

“Okay. Same old stuff at work. You know.”

“I do. I’m glad you all could make it. Enjoy yourselves.”

“Right. So, where’s all the stuff? I thought rich people have expensive food and waiters. I didn’t see a bar,” Margaret said.

“Try behaving as guests, polite and courteous. Don’t insult the people that are throwing this party. If any of you are going to snip, go home,” Shelly said. With that she walked to the grill to see what Larry was cooking on the grill. Some others from the department probably with their families were sitting around eating and talking to the other artists and their families. There wasn’t anywhere for kids to play around so Shelly worried about what they could get into. She looked around for the people that were hired to keep everyone safe. They were the same people that Anthony hired so she felt comfortable that they knew their jobs. The only one that may get irritated would be June. She didn’t do well in crowds.

“Shelly, wait up,” John said.

Shelly turned and waited.

“You know, when we got the invitation, I was surprised it was for the whole department. I thought it was a mistake.”

“I don’t know anything about the invitation, John. And I don’t want to reminisce about life at HI. I want to go forward.”

“I understand. Larry was telling me you have your studio here. Can I see it?”

It was annoying that a blast from her past could bring her down. Why was it? She had a new life that had different stressors. As she made her way across the patio she waved at the Happy Birthday wishers. June stopped her to ask about getting her loft modernized and Shelly told her to take it up with the manager. June was glassy-eyed already.

John looked over his shoulder at Jimmy that was tailing them.

“He your butler or something?” John asked humorously.

“Or something,” Shelly said. She opened the door and waved John in. She turned the lights on so there weren’t any shadows.

“Wow! I remember you showing me pictures of some of your stuff, but it looks different up close.” He stood close to one of them and eyed it. He looked tempted to touch it.

“Don’t get so close, please.”

He stepped back and walked around it.

The others suddenly standing in the doorway with drinks in hand.

“So, this is your studio,” Jackie said. “Nice couch. Look at that, even a microwave and hotplate. All the comforts of home.”

“You got a toilet in here? Those outhouses stink. Hey, there’s a shower in here. How come we have to use the outhouses if you have a toilet here?”

“You cook anything in there?”

“What is that?” Tom asked. He waved his beer at the nearest sculpture.

“Don’t touch anything. Don’t get that close. Look, you all need to leave,” Shelly told them nervously.

“We’re not going to break anything,” Linda said. “We’re just looking. Guys, don’t touch. This is sacred space,” she mocked.

“You’ve seen it now you can leave. Come on. Out.” Shelly didn’t like so many people milling around her studio. Linda was right. This was her sacred space and the idea that people were invading it had her nerves on edge.

Anthony walked in at the moment. “Hi, birthday girl. We’re waiting for you to officially start the party. Come on everyone. The art studios are off limits.”

Three of the women perked up and gravitated to Anthony.

“Hi, you want to show us your art?” Linda said.

Anthony smiled and waited for them to exit Shelly’s studio. Shelly was the last to leave, locking the door.

“I can see why you like to work alone,” he whispered.

Everyone gathered around the table where Gaylin made the announcement that the party was to begin and opened the bottle of root beer for the root beer floats that Shelly designated as the official drink of her party.

Anthony wandered around, speaking with some of the artists he knew and touched basis with Shelly now and then. Halley and Lauren were talking to Gaylin.

June was one moment friendly and another sulking. Shelly was hoping she wasn’t on drugs. She walked around and spoke to everyone and forced herself to stay for at least three hours. If she could, she would have escaped to her studio but that would have been too rude and obvious.

“Hey Shelly, we hear you have a gorgeous beach house a few minutes away from here. How about taking us for a view?” Linda said.

“Yeah. I’ve never seen a rich person’s house except in magazines,” Jackie said.

“Do you guys have a designated driver?” Shelly asked concerned.

“We can go over in your limo,” Margaret said.

“I’m talking about someone driving you home. You’ve been drinking too much to drive.”

“You can order us a cab,” Tom said.

“Or get your chauffer to drive us home,” Joyce said. “We heard you’re rolling in dough. If you have so much money, why this cheap party?”

Shelly turned from the group and looked for Halley or Lauren. They were at the picnic table competing with Larry in doing impersonations. She headed over to them to let Halley know she was heading home – without her HI acquaintances.

“Halley,” she leaned close to her ear, “I’m going to head back home. I’ve had enough.”

“Had enough of old friends?”

“They never were friends, except maybe John. Where is he?”

“The bald-headed guy?” Lauren asked.

“The Hawaiian shirt with surfboards.”

“He wanted to see the upstairs so Gaylin is showing him her weavings. I think she likes him.”

“I think he would like her cat more,” Shelly said. “Let me go and tell her bye and thanks for the party and then I’m leaving. If you want to stay...”

“No. We’re ready.”

“Hi, Anthony.”

“Hi, Shelly. I’m taking off. Happy Birthday, sis.” He gave her a peck on the cheek and walked along the sheltered walk-way to the parking lot.

Margret said something to him which had him hesitating. Whatever he said had her and the others moving to the table still laden with food.

“Don’t you wish you could hear what she said?” John said. He and Gaylin were coming back down the stairs. “You related to him? I never knew you had family except your mother and Ken.”

“No. I don’t want to hear anything they have to say. It’s the same crap,” Shelly said. “John, thanks for coming. Gaylin, thanks for the party.” She gave a hug to each.

“Maybe leaving through the back way would be smarter,” Gaylin said.

“Rather than run the gauntlet of their remarks? I don’t want to think of how you’re going to make sure they leave here safely, so they don’t think they can drink and drive and sue us for damages.”

“No problem there,” John said. “I’m the designated driver. And the ones with families have their spouses. Since I have the van pool van I was elected to drive. It was nice seeing you, Shelly. I’m happy for you. Your art is really nice.”

“Thank you. Nice seeing that you’re surviving too. Good night.”

Surprisingly enough, her ex-coworkers were busy at different places along the food line so they didn’t notice Shelly leave.

Shelly leaned back in the limo and sighed. “I’m so happy that’s over with. Next year, I’ll try and book a cruise somewhere.”

“Don’t you like celebrating your birthday with friends?” Lauren asked.

“Friends, yes. And that’s why I thank you two for coming. Ken said he’ll give me a Bar-B-Q and invite friends only. He wants to move the saltwater tank first.”

“You have a saltwater tank? What’s that?” Lauren asked.

“Do you have time to come in and see?”

She realized as she showed Lauren the fish tank that Halley hadn’t see the inside of her beach house. “Do you want a tour of the house, with the exception of Ken’s rooms?”

“I haven’t seen it in this incarnation,” Halley said.

“What?” Shelly asked.

“The first time I saw the inside was shortly after I began managing part of your mother’s portfolio. It was between renters. The second time was after the Malibu fires in 2003. That’s when we decided to rebuild with steel structures and fireproof roof. The insurance rates would be better.”

“It didn’t do much good to the roof in the recent fire.”

“The roof was guaranteed and they paid for most of the repairs of the house,” Halley said.

Lauren liked the balcony view and she tested out the furniture. “Why don’t you have a Bar-B-Q up here?” she asked.

Shelly laughed thinking of hearing her mother’s voice telling her not to eat in her bedroom.

“Oh, I got it. All the smoke would get in the bedrooms,” Lauren said.

While Lauren lingered on the balcony Shelly and Halley went back downstairs. Halley turned to look up the stairs for Lauren. “I wonder what she’s doing up there?”

“Trying to see what Ken’s room looks like. I don’t think she can see through the windows,” Shelly said.

“Hey, mom, did you know the sliding glass doors are one way?” Lauren said as she ran down the stairs.

“Sounds like they can share a balcony and still have privacy,” Halley said.

“What’s back here?” Lauren asked.

“An extra bedroom. It’s empty,” Shelly said.

Lauren looked anyway. “There’s nothing in here,” Lauren announced disappointed. “Well, I really like your fish tank the best. Is that all?”

“That’s all,” Shelly said. “Oh, and a stair to the beach.”

Lauren turned and left the house to run down the steps onto the beach.

Shelly turned to look at Halley. “I’ll have to ask him to have the party in the morning so we can relax and wait for the sun to go down.”

“Nothing like the one we left?” Halley asked.

“No. It’s not that I’m running from the past, it’s that I don’t have to keep up relationships with people that I was never friends with.”

“Thanks for the tour, Shelly and the party invite.” She leaned toward Shelly and brushed cheeks with her.

“You’re welcome.” Shelly watched her walk to the beach stairs. She went to join her and wait for Lauren who came running back up the stairs.

“There’s some naked people lying on the beach,” Lauren said.

“Are they alive?” Shelly asked.

“I think so,” Lauren said.

“As long as they’re just sunning themselves I have no problem with it,” Shelly said.

“You mean they’re always there?” Lauren asked surprised.

“I don’t know. I don’t take many walks along the beach, but the sun’s going down and they’ll get chilly if they stay out longer.”

“Mom, isn’t there a nude beach around here?” Lauren asked.

“Santa Barbara is the closest that’s legal.”

Lauren went skipping over to the limousine with the door being opened for her.

“Do you go to nudist beaches?” Shelly asked curious.

“Once. It was before I went to work for the family business. Father told me that if I was going to work for him that my private life must be as open as my public life. So, anything I know these days is for my clients’ benefit and not from personal testing.”

“Hm. Thanks again Halley. I really...” she paused watching Halley’s eyes. They went from friendly to withdrawn as if warning Shelly that there was something between them. “I really appreciated the escort.” Shelly smiled.

“We thank you for the ride. Lauren will be talking about the ride in a limo for a long time,” Halley said.

Shelly didn’t stay to watch the limo drive away. Her thoughts fluttered on everything but what she would have rather thought about – Halley. Picking up a drawing

pad and pencils she sat out on her bedroom balcony and sketched out ideas, determined to forget how she would like to spend her birthday night.

A soft knock on her door had her looking up. Meriner was there. Usually, if she was awake or not involved in a project, when the guards changed they would let her know.

“You have a message, Ms. Hayes,” Meriner said.

Shelly packed up her supplies and dropped them on the desk in her bedroom. A woman was standing looking out the big bay window. Beside her was a folded massage table.

“Yes?” Shelly asked.

The woman turned to face her. “Are you Shelly Hayes?”

“Yes.”

“Anthony has purchased you a birthday massage.”

“And you are...”

“Mary.”

Shelly glanced at Meriner wondering how she was going to check the woman out. Meriner was grinning. “Mr. Hayes drove her over to be sure she got here safely. Jimmy will see that she gets home alright.”

Shelly looked at her wondering what a birthday massage encompassed.

“Okay. My room’s upstairs. Meriner, would you mind carrying her massage table up the stairs?”

“Not at all, Ms. Hayes.”

While Mary setup her table Shelly took a shower. When she came out in a robe Mary was still fixing up her space.

“Are you ready?”

Shelly had been to a few masseuses when she was getting stress headaches. She hadn’t been to any since her mother died.

The woman’s hands were warm as they applied oil in smooth strokes. Shelly sighed. This was a practice she would have to make a regular practice of. She hoped by the time it was finished she would be so relaxed any thoughts of what she wanted to do to Halley was only subconscious.

While muscles were dug into, stretched then smoothed out Shelly reminded herself that dreaming of something she couldn’t have wasted time that could be used for doing what she could do. If she still had the urge, she would go out to a bar and look for someone and then worry about picking up something she didn’t want...a clingy girlfriend that wanted more than a one night stand and maybe some virus.

However, her imagination supplied her with safe sex with a perfect stranger that kept trying to morph into Halley. As the massage progressed to something more than a one-sided touching, Shelly found out what a birthday massage was. When Mary left, Shelly was wearing a smile when she fell asleep.

Chapter 23

Shelly glanced at her watch as she followed her bodyguard through the gate. The walkway from the driveway to her patio was sheltered with an arbor that would soon

have blooming flowers with thorns climbing through the latticework to separate her property from the party-hearty neighbors on the left. When she stepped onto the deck a beautiful view of the ocean spread out before her with the chilly wind blocked with the see-through windblast walls.

There was a glow of hot charcoal in the Bar-B-Q pit. Looking around the deck she smiled. It now looked used. They had a few Bar-B-Q parties that didn't have overnight guests too drunk to go home nor guests that wandered through the house without being invited. She thought Ken was testing out her staying power for socials in their home. Ken liked to have friends over she was finding out. While Steve, her new day bodyguard that replaced Tommy, looked around for anything out of place, she disabled the security and stepped in doors and reset it.

The gate bell rang, sending melodious tones through the screened door overlooking the deck and ocean.

"Hi. We're expecting guests," Ken said from the kitchen. "Did you get my message?"

"That I didn't have to dress up," Shelly said.

"I'll get the gate," Ken said.

Shelly put her keys in the box, her cell in it's stand, and peeked in the saltwater tank. A familiar laugh and a Spanish expression she knew very well had Shelly turning around quickly.

"Maria. Vini." Shelly threw her arms around them as they came into the room. She hadn't seen them since she sold the house. They had moved.

"Did you go on the cruise you promised yourselves?" she asked.

"It was very nice to be waited on and to not worry about fixing one meal to another," Maria said.

Vinicio nodded.

Shelly was holding Maria's hand, thrilled to see them.

"When did you get back?"

"Two days ago." Vinicio's face took on a stern look.

"What happened?" Shelly asked quickly.

"Our home we bought is gone, our money is gone," Maria threw up her hands disgusted. "It was good we went then because if we had waited, we would have lost that too, maybe."

"You were robbed?" Shelly asked horrified, wondering how they could have lost the two million her mother left them.

"They bought their condo through that bank that went out of business," Ken said. "Anyone with over one hundred thousand lost their shirts. I'll be right back." Ken jumped up and went to the kitchen then out to the patio.

"I heard about banks going out of business," Shelly said to the couple. "I'm so sorry you were caught up in it. Where are you staying?"

"Well, we are in a hotel for now. We were going to move into our new home when we got back from the cruise," Maria said.

"Work was being done on the floors and it was supposed to be completed on our return. Our friend, Huberto is the contractor. He picked us up at the boat and said he was told to stop all work on the house because our check bounced on the payment. How could

that be, I asked him, when we have all that money in our account and the same bank has our loan?" Vini said.

"Huberto and Vini had worked out tile designs for the entire house. The bank person would not let him take the tiles, none of the supplies. We paid for it!" Maria said angrily.

"You didn't move any of your work in, did you?" Shelly asked concerned.

"No, no," Vinicio sighed and then nodded. "You are right. We should look at the bright side. We didn't lose everything and we had a wonderful cruise." Vinicio and Maria exchanged glances and smiles, "And what we stored was not lost. Most of our belongings."

Ken had come back in and was looking at Shelly. His eyes moved to the spare room behind the kitchen then back to Shelly. Shelly nodded.

"We have a large room behind the kitchen you two can stay in until you decide what to do or until we all drive each other crazy. Plus, there's an art warehouse down the road and I know they have two vacancies. One with living space and another just the workspace." Both nodded their heads. "Oh, you've seen it?"

"Ken told us about the warehouse."

"The living space is not available so Vini rented the space," Ken glanced at his Bar-B-Q and gave a curse and rushed outside.

"Do you want to look at the room?" Shelly asked. "You don't have to take it."

"We will look at it, but we don't want to move in on you," Maria said.

"Well, unless you plan on having a lot of parties or inviting people over that are detrimental to our peace of mind, I can't think of you being an inconvenience." Shelly said. "The artist's barn has a once a month party where everyone shows their work if they want. Kids are invited so there're no drugs or dangerous goings on."

She pushed open the empty room and again was impressed with the amount of space.

"It is a big room!" Maria walked around and looked at the bathroom and closets. Vini stood in the doorway with Shelly.

"If you need help straightening out the property mess, I'll ask Halley to look into it. The Parkers are great for fixing things."

"That would be very nice of you, Shelly." Maria hesitated. "I understand you have changed your name?"

"To my father's name, yes."

"Oh, I see," Maria said.

"Let's go outside so Ken doesn't have to keep running back and forth."

Shelly thought of her beach house and how it was filling up with people that her mother had left money to. It was amusing. While they ate their Bar-B-Q'd swordfish, corn on the cob and rice with vegetables they made a toast to LeeAnn. Tears were shared and memories of her acts of kindness that came to her easily. Shelly didn't realize that her mother visited Maria so often before she had gotten sick. Maria grew her own herbs for her meals and LeeAnn liked to exchange what she grew with her. Both had their failures and successes that complimented the other.

Long after Maria and Vinicio Menchu left Shelly sat on the balcony upstairs watching the night sky for shooting stars or ETs that might fill up her loneliness. It had

been a long time since she missed her mother so much. Movement from the beach below had her attention diverted.

Her neighbor to the right only came out late at night when everyone was in bed or about ready to go to bed. All she knew was that he or she had a dog that would run through the waves. It was hard to tell the gender when the figure was wrapped up in genderless clothing.

But, this wasn't her neighbor. It didn't look like someone from the house on the left of her either. They kept looking up at the houses trying to figure out which one was which. They must have decided on hers because they started up her stairs.

A dark figure stopped the late visitor. Whatever was exchanged had the visitor heading back down the beach. Curious she went to speak with her bodyguard. Jimmy was sitting on the couch speaking to someone in a low voice on his cell.

Shelly went into the kitchen and pulled out a water bottle. When she passed Jimmy he was off the phone.

"Jimmy, who was that at the stairs?"

"She said her name was Kathleen Lee."

"Kath! Where did she go?" Shelly ran out the door and out along the road hoping to catch her. It was going years back when she had a brief relationship with someone before she crashed with her involvement with Michelle Keloviski and didn't want to attempt another relationship.

She could see car lights turn on across the road. She waved her hands, hoping it was Kath Lee. The BMW made a U-turn coming to a stop near her. The window went down and for a long moment both women looked at each other, noting how much they changed.

"Kath, how are you doing?"

"Well enough. How are you? I met your guard. He wasn't too happy with my dropping in."

"Are you in a hurry?" Shelly asked.

"No. I was wondering if you wanted to go out for a drink."

"I'd love to. Can you park for a few moments and I'll change?"

Kath smiled. Jimmy was close by looking up and down the street, and then at Kath as they exchanged plans. As the two walked back into the house, Jimmy stayed back a few paces.

"Would you like something while I get ready?"

"No. I'm alright. Would you mind if I walked around?"

"No."

Shelly ran up the stairs, thinking of their short but passionate relationship. If Michelle hadn't come along Shelly wondered if they would have gone further. She shook her head. It was a waste of time to think of what could have been. The present was what she had to work with.

Clothing was tossed on the bed and the shower was turned on. While she was washing, she turned to see a naked Kath step into the bathing room. She forgot the shower was their favorite place to make love. Without hesitation, they embraced.

"I've missed you," two voices said. After that nothing much was said as they renewed their relationship.

When they did get moving to the bar, Jimmy sat in the back seat. Kath didn't say anything about his coming along but he did stand out at the women's bar. It was ten minutes later that Jimmy came to speak to her.

"Ms. Hayes, I stand out pretty much here. Sam will be watching out for you. She's wearing the leathers over at the pool table."

"Okay. Thanks, Jimmy."

Kath leaned into Shelly. "Is something wrong?" she yelled into her ear.

"No. Do you want to dance?"

"Have you gotten better?"

"No."

They both went to the dance floor and danced through most of the night.

"Do you want to spend the night?" Shelly asked.

"No. I work tomorrow. How about this weekend? Two days from now if you've lost track of days."

"I'm doing a Habitat for Humanity this weekend during the daytime. Do you want to come for dinner and then go out?"

"How about I bring dinner Friday night and we can spend the night getting reacquainted."

Shelly smiled. "That sounds nice."

"Okay."

Shelly walked by the leathered woman and realized she was Sam the Pool Shark from her first visit to the bar. Sam casually watched her leave while she chalked her pool stick.

"You bored with me already?" Kath asked.

"No. That woman in the leathers and rings in places I don't want to image about, is a pool shark. My first visit here she was gracious enough to let me have two turns."

"Oh, yeah?" Kath turned to look at her.

"Do you play pool?" Shelly asked as they walked to Kath's car that Jimmy was standing near.

"Yes. I've been called a shark a few times."

"Then you two should play a game together," Shelly said.

Kath dropped Jimmy and Shelly off at her beach house. Jerry was waiting inside. The two exchanged reports and Jimmy left.

"Are your hours changing?" Shelly asked.

"We'll be mixing up the shifts so that we're not predictable. I hear Sam will accompany you when you go out. It makes it easier."

"Yes. I guess it would. Good night, Jerry."

"Good night, Ms. Hayes."

Sam is a bodyguard? Shelly shook her head in thinking how small her world really was.

Chapter 24

The next few days were busy with her art and getting Maria and Vini settled in. Maria celebrated with planting an herb collection in pots on the patio and then baked a

lamb dinner their first night there. It was a lamb dinner that LeeAnn had first invited Maria and Vini over to have. They all saluted her over the lamb with a glass of wine.

It was the second day when Maria was fixing breakfast that Jafar, their housecleaner arrived for his once a week cleaning. Shelly or Ken were always there to let him in. He was upset when he saw Maria.

It took a while to assure Jafar that Maria wasn't replacing him.

"Maria's not my maid! She and Vini are here until they get a place of their own. Jafar, I like your cleaning," Shelly insisted.

"You do?" he asked surprised.

"Yes."

"Oh, you do," he repeated.

"Yes," Shelly said firmly. She looked at Maria and then at Vini who came out of their bedroom dressed for a day painting. He looked extremely happy.

"Ah, before we start work, we eat," Vini said. He didn't seem to know that a small drama had been averted.

"Vini, this is Jafar. Jafar cleans this house. If you and Maria would rather not, he won't clean your room."

Maria's eyes opened wide.

"Yes. I clean. It is my job. I clean very clean."

"He does, Maria. He leaves everything shiny."

"Of course, if it's your job." She smiled.

"Okay. That's settled. First, we all eat breakfast. Jafar, would you like to join us?"

He shook his head no. "I get to work." He went upstairs to start as he usually did with the bedrooms.

"I forgot he was coming today. He comes once a week at about the same time. Either Ken or me let him in and wait until he finishes."

Maria waved her hand at Shelly. "You and Vini need to get to your work. I will let him out."

Shelly drove Vini over with his art equipment in boxes in her Jags trunk. The three would not be able to fit comfortably in her truck and Shelly didn't want her bodyguard hanging out of her truck bed. It was bad for her image. It took twenty minutes to unpack his supplies and he insisted that Shelly needed to get to her work. He would make his way around and introduce himself.

Gaylin came down and joined Vini. Satisfied he was okay, Shelly went into her studio and began her work. LeeAnn was on her mind as she began a new project. She noted her parts from the junk yard were low. Her cell vibrated against her hip.

It was Anthony's number. "Hello?"

"Sure...I'm in the middle of a project right now...No. I have a date Friday night." Suddenly she realized that she couldn't bring Kath home. She wasn't the only one that lived there. "Oh, shit," she whispered. "No, no. Not you Anthony. I just remembered, Kath is bringing dinner and we planned on spending the night in, only I can't bring her home! I don't live alone anymore."

"What did you say?" Shelly asked. "Really?...There's no microphones or electronic devices there are there?" she asked suspiciously. "No, I appreciate it. Just where is it located?" Shelly laughed. "You saved my butt. For that, I'll make time right now. Can we meet at this private place?" She glanced at her watch. "Thirty

minutes?...Oh, you two are already on the way. Okay. I'll be there." She folded her phone and turned everything off. Vini was sitting in the sun with his straw hat mixing paints on his pallet.

"Vini, I'm going to meet with my brother for some business. Here's the keys to my truck if you need to drive somewhere."

"Sure, sure. I don't need your keys. It's a short walk." He glanced at her bodyguard. "I don't have so many people interested in me."

Shelly hurried to her Jag. Anthony had a woman who he thought would make a good secretary for her. She was curious who he thought would fit her definition of a secretary.

"We're looking for a bean pole of an apartment...oh, there it is. He's right. Not much parking." Shelly parked on the driveway that had a Private Parking others will be towed away sign.

She turned as Anthony's car pulled beside her. The woman that got out of the car with Anthony was an older woman.

"Melody Palmer – Shelly Hayes. Come on up. It's been the Hayes get-away for years." The four of them entered the bottom floor that had an elevator. At the top Shelly found a large one room that all the connivances of a lover's retreat.

"Gods but I hope she doesn't get the wrong idea," Shelly said.

"What kind of a night were you planning?" Anthony asked.

"Just what this place offers. What a view."

"If you want movies, it's cable."

"Will I be crowding someone's time here?"

"No. I own it now. I inherited it from dad." He grinned. "I don't want to upset you but your mother and dad used to meet here after their marriage ended. He loved her, you know. No matter how many other wives he had, he loved her above all."

"Don't tell me anymore. I don't want to think my mother... well, you know. This is fine. Thank you Anthony." She turned to Melody Palmer. "I've never had a secretary before. What am I to expect?"

"Whatever you need. I am your gofer, so-to-speak. I make sure you make it to your appointments on time and make appointments for you."

"Like medical appointments, vacations, art shows, how many pieces you need to have at what show, all sorts of things," Anthony said.

"Okay. Why don't we try each other out and see if we're okay with each other's personalities. I...don't have an office for you. Do you work in an office?"

"I can work from home until we work that out. I can start today," Melody said.

"Good. I have a bunch of mail you can go through. I usually throw everything but bills away. I have a date Friday night, Habitat for Humanity on Saturday and Sunday and I'll have to look on my calendar for the rest."

"I can make a copy of your calendar. I can set that up for you."

"Okay." Shelly looked around. "Let's go back to the beach house so I can introduce you to Maria." She looked at Anthony. "Maria and Vini were neighbors of LeeAnn's. They took care of her when I wasn't there and were good friends of hers. Their money was put in one of the banks that went bust. They lost a lot of money and their mortgage. I asked Halley if she could look into it. Until that gets straightened out their staying in the spare room downstairs."

“Are you planning on filling up all your rooms?” Anthony asked.

“Well, Ken and I were talking about a workout room and a game room in the spare rooms and the downstairs room was to be the workout room. Until Maria and Vini move out, I guess we’ll hold out with the workout room.”

Anthony and Melody drove together to the ocean beach house. Shelly was thinking about the room that had an elaborate hot tub, bed, view of the ocean, kitchenette, and bar. Would Kath be insulted that she took here there instead of her bedroom. She was the one that made the rules and it was out of respect of her one roommate at the time. The idea of running into strange men at all sorts of hours of the night or morning had her deciding that she didn’t want Ken to face strange women walking around naked

Maria was out on the patio working on her pots of herbs. Shelly made the introductions, realizing that Maria had not met Anthony since LeeAnn’s funeral. The two women seemed to find each other agreeable. Maria took Melody inside to show her the mail basket.

“Shelly, Melody is a Hayes,” Anthony said softly. “A third cousin. She’s going through a rough divorce right now and could use a job.”

“Is there going to be problems because she’s a third cousin?”

Anthony looked surprised. “No. Why should there be? We take care of our own. Nobody gets a free ride but they do get help in leading productive lives. If you need her to work in an office, you can rent space at Parker’s. It’s not that far from here and it will give Melody a solid environment. She was a school teacher once.”

“She doesn’t want to go back to teaching?”

“No. She’s been out of it for too long. Right now, she just needs to get her confidence back. She ran her husband’s office so she knows her way around.”

“Thanks for looking out for both of us, Anthony.”

He smiled. “It’s what’s being a Hayes is about.”

Shelly dialed Halley’s number. “Hi, Halley...No, I’m okay. I just hired a secretary and I need some office space. Anthony said you might have a spare office to rent?” Shelly smiled. “Okay. Thanks.” She closed her phone.

“She had one ready?” Anthony asked.

“Yep.”

“I’ll take her there,” Anthony said. “We’ve kept you from your art long enough. I’ll get her setup.”

When Maria and Melody came out, the two women were laughing pleasantly. Melody had an armload of mail. Shelly didn’t realize she had been avoiding so many days of mail.

“We have an office for you,” Anthony said. “Since I’m your chauffeur, let’s go see what your desk needs.”

Chapter 25

The alarm on her workbench went off at the same time that her cell buzzed her. Vini at the same time knocked on her door.

Meriner opened the door to let Vini in and Shelly answered her cell. “Hello?” Her lips curled in a smile. Melody was letting her know she had one hour to get ready for her

date. “Thanks.” She folded up her phone and turned to Vini. “Hi, Vini. How’s your work coming along?”

“It is a good place. Maria doesn’t have to worry about the paint smell nor of me leaving paint on her things. You have to get ready for your date,” he said.

“Ah, yeah.”

Jimmy smiled and tapped his watch.

“If I’m late, with all of these reminders... Hey! Kath,” Shelly smiled and went to greet Kath. “Kath, this is Vini and Jimmy my bodyguard. You’re early.”

“That’s because I know when you’re involved in your art, you’re always late. Can I look?”

“Yes. Take a look while I change out of these.”

It took five minutes to change out of her sweaty clothes but she didn’t dare take a quick shower. Her thoughts were already on what her she wanted their night to be.

“Where’s Vini, I was going to ask him if he wants a ride home?”

“Home?”

“Well, yeah. I have a houseful of people so I thought you and I can stay at a place further up the coast. It’s got a view of the ocean from high up and it’s...hmm. You’ll have to see it. My brother told me...”

“Brother? Oh, you mean Anthony Hayes. The art guy. I heard you finally got into the art business. So, do you want me to follow you somewhere?”

Shelly remembered she always kept an overnight bag in her trunk. She didn’t need to return home. “Yeah. I have the keys.”

They parked their cars in the two car garage and rode the elevator to the top floor.

“This is a good view.” Kath turned to look at her. “While you clean up I’ll set our dinner out.” She looked around the room. “This is a love den.” She laughed. “This is ours for the night?”

“Yes. I understand it’s the family love den. I’ll be right back.” Shelly was sure she set a record for showering. The soap in her bag was herbal scented. She hoped Kath liked it.

Kath was waiting for her. Their food was on a coffee table and pillows were lying about the table. Shelly didn’t dress but joined Kath naked. Kath took more time to study her.

“You’ve been working out,” she said softly. “I like that.”

While they ate Kath remained dressed, sometimes reaching over to touch Shelly. Memory of how they had spent an entire weekend together ran through Shelly’s mind.

“Why did you look me up?” Shelly asked.

“Shh. This is a lovers’ den. Let’s not ruin the mood with anything not about making love.” She leaned over and kissed Shelly. “I’m glad you left your bodyguard downstairs.” She kissed her again. Shelly didn’t think it was important to tell her that her male bodyguard had been changed to Sam and she didn’t think Sam the type to remain downstairs when her client was elsewhere. Shelly realized she came a long way from the shy lover that Kath knew, even that she knew.

Shelly ate little since Kath’s sudden turning up left her suspicious and eating food that she didn’t see prepared wasn’t being a supportive client for her bodyguard team. Kath mistook her lack of appetite for food to be in anticipation of their evening of love making and put aside her food and crawled over to Shelly’s cushion.

They started slow and moved from the cushions to the hot tub that Kath had filled while Shelly took her shower. It explained the low water pressure. Sometime between shriveling into a prune in the hot tub and exhausted from climaxes, they moved to the bed. The sweet fresh smell of the sheets confirmed Anthony's assurance that everything was fresh and clean.

A knock on the door woke them both up. Shelly looked at the clock on the headboard. "I have the Habitat site to get to."

"Do you want to get together again tonight?" Kath asked. "I'm in town until Wednesday then I head back to Europe for a month."

"What do you do?" Shelly asked as she rolled out of the bed. She went to the door. "We're up. We'll be out in a bit."

"I'm a pilot."

"We're you a pilot when we met?"

"I was in the Air Force then. I was soon to be discharged with a job already lined up flying jets for CEOs." She kissed Shelly on the mouth. "Hmm. Let's take a shower together."

It took a little longer with the shower. While Shelly was looking for a sock she remembered she needed to go home first and change to jeans and a work shirt, grab her belt with hammer and other equipment and head for downtown LA.

"Can I call you and let you know what time I'll be done?"

Kath gave her a card.

As they went down the stairs, Shelly didn't see anyone around until in the garage a motorcycle was near her Jag. Shelly waved to Kath as she pulled out and drove off.

"You know her well?"

Shelly turned to look at Sam. She was wearing what she always saw her in, leathers and bikers boots. "I haven't seen her for years. She said she's a pilot that flies CEOs to Europe. I don't own a plane so she can't be looking for a job."

Sam snorted. "Girl, you are naïve. Hayes Foundation owns a fleet of personal jets. Rents them out to various businesses the Hayes own. Do you have to be somewhere soon?"

"Yeah, but I have to change clothes. When does your shift end?"

"Don't worry about me. You want a ride?" She handed a helmet to Shelly.

Shelly made it to the Habitat site with minutes to spare on the back of Sam's bike.

At four in the afternoon Shelly called Kath. She arranged to meet her at the bar at ten. Then called Anthony to make sure she could still use his private den. Tired Shelly found Jimmy sitting in her Jag on the street near the house Habitat workers were repairing, waiting for her. While he drove her back to the beach Shelly slept.

"Hi, Maria," Shelly called as she opened the doors.

"You are the only one on time for dinner," she said.

Shelly didn't realize they would be having dinner on a regular basis. Her resistance to being on someone else's time was suppressed as she reminded herself it was only until they got their condo back. She would find out from Halley how that was coming along.

"Good. I get the hot water first." By the time she was dressed the others had returned. Ken had a friend with him, Eddie. They all ate at the bar which Shelly could already tell Maria didn't think it was proper.

“Are you coming home tonight?” Ken asked.

“No. Probably not.”

“The pool table and pin ball machines have been setup in the room across from your room.”

“Oh, good. I’ll have to get in some warm up pool games.”

After dinner Maria told everyone she could handle the dishes herself and everyone shouldn’t worry about it. Vini sat on a stool while Maria washed the dishes. They talked about their day.

Shelly followed Ken and Eddie upstairs.

“What do you think?” Ken asked.

“You didn’t say anything about the shuffle board. I love the shuffle board!” Shelly said. She looked at the pool table and was embarrassed when an image of her and Kath sprawled over the table came to her. The pin ball machines were winking and blinking, ready to be used. She tried a shot and was startled at how loud it was.

“This is not for after hours,” she said.

“Why not?” Eddie asked. He grabbed the knob and started a game. He was really into it. There were already scores on the board to beat.

“Eddie is a pinball master or nearly there,” Ken said.

“Is there a way to lower the sound?” Shelly asked Ken.

“I don’t think you can hear it that much with the door closed,” Ken said. He watched his boyfriend as he worked the table.

Shelly was beginning to realize that with more people in the house, she wasn’t the queen of her own domain. She had also seen Maria’s frown at the mention of the games upstairs. We’re they already making too much noise?

“I’ll be right back.” Shelly left the two to their games and ran downstairs to see if the noise was annoying. In the kitchen, she could hear the dinging and other noises faintly then it was silent like a door closed.

Shelly went back upstairs and lay down for a while. She had a few hours until she had to get ready. The noise from the game room was annoying. Shelly turned her radio on and ended up wearing her headset to sleep.

Someone shaking her woke her up. Sam was standing over her dressed in her usual leather outfit.

“Ms. Hayes. You have a date in thirty minutes. You always sleep with a headset on?”

“No. I couldn’t sleep with the pinball machine making that racket. We have a pool table too if you want to look at it.” Shelly yawned and got up. Turning the light on she began to pick out her clothes.

Sam was back. “It seems your roommate is using the game room for more than one type of game. I’ll check it out another time when it’s not so busy. Jimmy will drive with you to the bar and watch your car while I’ll be inside keeping an eye on your drink. Al right?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“All in a night’s work.” Sam left.

A few minutes before ten, Shelly was being carded at the door. She went to the bar and got a 7up. Kath was waiting for her at a table.

“Your pool shark has been wiping the table pretty steadily. She wasn’t as nice to me as she was to you. She didn’t even give me a one shot. She won the first shot and cleaned the table. I don’t see where she gets any enjoyment out of playing with herself,” Kath grinned at Shelly.

“I seem to remember you liked women who played with themselves, provided you got to watch,” Shelly reminded her.

“I remember you were a beginner at that. Have you been practicing?” Kath asked.

“When you’re bored here, we can go and see.”

Kath smiled and lifted her glass. They spent a few hours, dancing and watching the other women, who were watching them.

“You ready to go?” Kath asked.

“I’m ready,” Shelly said.

“Shall we drive in separate cars or let your bodyguard follow along?”

“I’ll ask. He’s the expert.” They walked out of the bar and saw Jimmy talking to someone near her car.

“I’ll be right back.” Shelly told Kath.

Jimmy caught sight of Shelly. It turned out that it was a street person, interested in what Jimmy was doing.

“Do you want to follow?”

“You trust her?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t see her as trying to kidnap or kill me.”

“We put a device on her vehicle. We did a background check on her. She’s a pilot working for an international firm.”

“She hasn’t met any of the Bowers has she?”

Jimmy grinned. “The first thing that was checked – Who does she know?”

Shelly went back to Kath’s BMW and climbed in. “He’ll follow. Remember how to get there?”

“I sure do.”

Chapter 26

The next morning Kath and her parted while this time Shelly drove her pickup to the Habitat site. By evening she was exhausted and glad that Kath had jokingly told her that they both needed some sleep. When she got home the pinball machine was going and after knocking found Ken wrapped around Eddie while he was playing the machine. They both were naked.

Shelly rapped loudly on the door. “Hey! I’d appreciate it if you did private things in your own room.” She waited for a few minutes before Ken looked at her. His eyes looked glassy and he didn’t recognize her. He was on drugs. Shelly walked into the room, fearful for Ken.

“What did you give him,” she demanded of Eddie.

“I didn’t give him anything. He gave it to himself. What are you his babysitter?”

“I’m his sister. He means something to me. Get your clothes on and get out of here.”

Eddie laughed and pushed Ken off him. Meriner came into the room and his presence got Eddie moving. Ken was leaning against the machines, looking every bit out of it.

“Make sure he leaves,” Shelly told Meriner. He nodded.

When they left Shelly tried to get Ken’s attention. A couple of minutes later Meriner was back.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked fearfully.

“Whatever it is, he’s not doing well.” His finger was on Ken’s pulse.

“Let’s get him to the hospital.”

“Do you know how long the wait is in an emergency room?”

“Then I’ll call the paramedics.” While Shelly called, Meriner searched the game room and then Ken’s room for any drugs. He didn’t find any. He then brought some clothes to help Shelly dress him.

“What do you think he took?”

By the time the paramedics came, Ken was unconscious. Anthony, Melody and Halley were running up the stairs to see what was happening. Maria was looking frightened downstairs.

“What’s going on,” Anthony demanded.

“Either Eddie gave something to Ken or Ken took something. I don’t know when but...” Shelly trembled, thinking of how pale Ken looked.

“Eddie who?”

“I don’t know. He just introduced him to me as Eddie. Maria do you know anything about Eddie?”

Maria had come up the stairs and looked around the room disapprovingly. She pursed her lips for a moment. “He is a gay man.” That was all she said. Shelly was thinking that Maria was having second thoughts of living with Shelly and Ken. Didn’t she know they were gay?

Halley must have picked up on that too because she stepped away and made a phone call.

Sam was talking to Jimmy on the patio when the paramedics arrived. When they were rolling Ken out Sam was gone. Shelly followed the ambulance that rushed Ken to the nearest hospital. In all the chaos, Shelly noticed there was more security around her house.

“Go on and be with him,” Halley encouraged. “We’ll take care of things here.”

Meriner drove after the ambulance. Because she wasn’t family it was difficult to get any information. It was after she filled out the papers on Ken where she put her name as the one paying for the hospital bill, did someone finally come and speak with her. Ken was in a drug induced coma.

Shelly was in shock. She paced and thought and paced and thought and decided that if she found out it had to do with the Bower family, then someone was going to have a terrible accident.

“You can’t do anything right now,” a nurse told her, “and visiting hours are over.”

Shelly looked at Meriner. “I want around the clock protection for him. I want someone who knows about medication to watch over him.” A sob caught in her throat. She looked at the nurse. “I’m not leaving until he has that protection.”

She was going to say something but didn’t.

Meriner nodded and pulled out his cell.

Anthony came striding down the hospital corridor with Halley and Melody trying to keep up. "Let's go over there and talk," he told Shelly.

Anthony looked tired. "It was a hit," he said. "We think it was something Eric arranged but it's something Ashley would instigate. We have people looking into it. About Maria and Vinicio Menchu, I'm afraid your mother's friend didn't realize you and Ken were gay."

"I guess not. I couldn't tell if it was the pinball machines or Eddie she was getting cross-eyed over."

"She's a Jehovah Witness."

"You're kidding me. I would never have known. She's never brought her religious beliefs up and I thought that's part of their thing. Is she looking to move?"

Halley laughed. "Oh, yes. She had me drive her to Vinicio's studio and she refused to go back to that den of sin. I'm sorry about them losing their money, but you know, most of it went to Maria's religion. I don't think her husband knows that. He let's her handle the money. Anyway, the bank has sold their mortgage and if they pay the last three months they missed, they can move into their home. I suggest you pay six months to get them out of your hair," Halley said.

"What about Vini's rental of the studio?"

"Ken paid a month for Vini because of the story they told to Ken about losing all their inheritance money."

At the mention of Ken, Shelly rubbed her face in misery. "Ken is my best friend."

"Come home and rest," Anthony coaxed. "A guard is here to watch over Ken. Your place has been gone over and we didn't find anything. No drugs or paraphernalia. Eddie probably had everything on him."

"I don't feel safe in my home anymore," Shelly said.

"Well, where do you want to go?"

"Home."

Shelly didn't know who took her home or who was around. All she wanted was to go to bed and wake up as if this was all a bad dream and it didn't happen.

The next morning it was raining. Shelly stared out at the dark ocean until her growling stomach got too loud. Jerry was sitting in the front room talking to someone on his cell. When he saw Shelly coming down the stairs he stood up.

"You're looking like your world just crash down on you."

"That's just how I feel. Have you heard anything from the hospital?"

"He's still in a coma. They haven't gotten all the lab tests back."

Shelly hesitated about going into the kitchen. Maria had rearranged it to suit her comfort since she was the one that cooked.

"Would you rather order takeout?" Jerry asked.

"I want to hide in my studio, but I don't want to run into Vini. I just don't understand how people could change so much."

"Maybe they didn't know you were gay. People have their prejudices and there's not much you can do about it."

Shelly went back upstairs and took a shower and changed into work clothes. She also remembered she needed to change clothes in her overnight case. When she came back downstairs she could smell something good cooking. Sam was at the stove. She had

her leather coat off and was wearing a black cut-off T-shirt showing buffed muscular arms. She looked over at Shelly as she came down the stairs.

“You look like a bear ate you and pooped you out over a cliff. How does scrambled eggs and toast sound? It’s better than nothing. You going to the hospital or your studio? Well, eat first and then make a decision. You can’t mope all day. It’s not good for your complexion.”

Shelly climbed on the stool and ate her breakfast that Sam set in front of her. Sam called the hospital while Shelly ate.

“No change,” she said to Shelly.

“Sam, do you wear a clit ring too?”

Sam looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Only my girlfriend knows that. Where’s all the mystery if everyone knew.”

“I’m not everyone and I won’t tell,” Shelly said.

“I know you would rather think about the interesting mysteries of what I have ringed and what I don’t, but we have real life business here.”

“Okay. You have my undivided attention.”

“First of all, Eddie was found shot in the head last night about an hour after he left here. Shots were fired in a nearby park, the cops went out, and there he was and the weapon nearby.”

“Did they find anything on him to give us a clue what he inflicted Ken with?” Shelly asked.

“No,” Sam said.

“How did you know it was Eddie?” Shelly asked.

“His driver’s license. Eddie Mays. He had a card with your name and this address on it. Have you made any business cards?”

“No.”

“Well, this is what’s going to happen; your lawyer is going to be present when you’re going to be questioned. You’ve been asked to come down to the Malibu Police Department at 10 am this morning.”

“What did you see when you went into the room the other night?” Shelly asked.

Sam shook her head. “I’m a trained observer, and in the dark, I’m not sure at all. Whatever it was that happened, it started before they came here.”

“Ken and I had an agreement that we wouldn’t bring our dates here. It was out of respect for each other and...” Shelly squeezed her eyes tight, wiping the tears that leaked through. “Gods, but if he hadn’t brought him here, he would have died somewhere alone.”

Sam looked over the front room. “First off, you need to change the code on your security lock. Secondly, you need to change the security. You’ve got too many people knowing what your business here is about. Someone’s declared war on you and you need one place at least that’s safe.”

“Can this place be made safe?”

“It depends on what kind of an attack these people are capable of. My job is to figure that out and act accordingly. So, since there isn’t any change in Ken, why not go to your studio? It’s safe and it’ll give you something to do while we’re waiting for information.”

“Sam, do the Bowers have bodyguards?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t see Ashley Sexton with one when she visited the Castle for a meeting.”

“He was waiting in the her car.”

“Who do they hire?”

“Family, just like we do. Who better to trust?”

Shelly looked at Sam. “Are you a Hayes?”

Sam grinned. “And someone’s worse nightmare.”

“So, where do you fit in this family hierarchy?”

“What is so important about that?” Sam asked.

“I feel like I’m in some kind of mafia nightmare.”

Sam laughed. “Not quite. Shall you get going? I’d like to get this place rewired.”

“Why do I have to leave? Why can’t I watch?”

“Don’t you want to work?”

“No.”

“Then stay. But I have work to do.”

“Okay. Do you want coffee? Jerry?”

“Jerry is working. So am I.”

“Are you worried about leaving me alone when you have to go to the rest room?”

Jerry can stand with his back to me. Believe it or not, I’m not a prude. I went to Girl Scout camps. The Boy Scouts were just up the road and would try to gross us out. We won all but one.”

Sam glared at Shelly. “We’re working is what it is. We don’t eat and drink on the job. I’m going outside to get my tools. Jerry... behave yourself.”

“Right, Gen’rl,” he said with a serious face. “I mean, Sarge.” He grinned at Sam’s scowl.

“Are you family too?” Shelly asked.

“I married into the family. You won’t find me on the family hierarchy of anything.”

“There must be a hierarchy to bodyguards.”

Jerry looked doubtful. “I think on that one I’d be pretty low there too. This is my second assignment with someone important and it’ll take more than two successes to rise up the list. It’s not like I don’t like my job with guarding people for short terms. It’s a different type of preparation.”

“What makes body guarding me so important?”

Sam came back in with two packs. She dropped one near the closet that had the monitoring equipment and took the other upstairs.

“Well, are you going to answer her?” Sam asked as she came back down. Jerry’s face turned red and he hesitated.

“You’re the tie breaker vote. You inherited it from your father as first born. Anthony inherited, as the first-born son, the other votes the women don’t hear much about. This is a patriarchal run organization though not as bad as some. So, that’s your importance. You control which way critical decisions go.”

“No I don’t. Grandfather does.”

Sam smirked. “Yes, you can butt heads with him, which I hear your father did too, which is how you came to be. Lucky for the Hayes he did. Ashley was the worst

marriage arrangement made to date. Every meeting you attend I'm sure they all are reminded of it."

Sam opened up the closet and began to work.

"Come on Jerry. We're going upstairs to the game room."

"He's not to be your playmate," Sam's voice came from the closet interior. "He needs to stay focused on his job."

Stopping on the stairs, Shelly turned and went into the backroom to see how much had to be moved out for Maria and Vini. She sighed at the change of their relationship. She dialed Melody's number.

"Good morning, Melody. Are you all right?... Yes, I'm fine. Can you look for a storage place for the Menchu's near their condo?...It's worse?...No, I don't want to buy them a condo. They chose to blow two million dollars and lie about it. Since Maria gave so much to her church or whatever she calls it, let the one that took the money buy them a condo...Damn."

Maria and her church were suing her for a lot of money. Melody told her they were gambling on Shelly being too occupied with Ken and her other worries and would settle out of court. According to Melody, the Hayes' lawyers were used to this type of suing and already were taking care of it. Like Shelly, they didn't want to let people think they could get away with blackmailing or extorting money from a Hayes.

Melody already made arrangements for their belongings to be moved. Melody assured Shelly everything was being taken care of. While Shelly was speaking on the phone her eyes spied something that was out of place.

"Oh, shit!" Sam said behind her.

"What?"

"Someone's been in here while we were busy elsewhere. Those are illegal drugs. If we have cops here, baby you're in trouble."

"I'm being setup?"

"Someone doesn't like you and they have all the gunships in the harbor pointing at your castle on the beach. Boom-boom."

"What now?"

"I would get rid of it, but I think they're ready for that. Let's try something different."

"Sam, the movers are here," Jerry said.

"Are they people we know?" Sam asked.

"No."

"Then don't let them in. You, princess, help me gather this stuff up." Sam pulled out some gloves and had Shelly put them on. In a plastic bag, they went through the entire room dumping things that may be illegal into it. In the medicine cabinet Sam removed a bottle to look at it closer. "Well, here's something interesting." She poked it and went through the rest. "This woman keeps a lot of pills for a person that's a Jehovah Witness."

"Maybe she's OCD and hopes the religion will control her."

"Yeah, what's going on, Jerry?"

"The Menchu's are outside with the police."

“This is getting better.” She took the bag from Shelly and pushed her out the door. “Go upstairs and practice your pool. Stay away from windows. Jerry, let them in and keep them contained.”

Shelly ran up the stairs and let Sam handle what was going on downstairs. But just in case she called Halley.

“Hi. Sorry to bother you, but the Menchu’s are here with the police. Should I be asking for a lawyer?... Yes, Sam’s here.... Okay. I just don’t want her blind-sided. I like her being around.”

She was working on a pool shot when a clearing voice had her look toward the doorway.

“Ms. Hayes, the police would like to speak with you,” Jimmy said. A police officer was at his elbow.

“One second,” she pulled out her cell that was buzzing. “It’s the hospital,” she said with relief. “Hello, this is Shelly Hayes... Yes.... He does have siblings and cousins. I’ll contact them.... Thank you.”

Shelly steeled herself not to think of murderous thoughts against whoever had attacked Ken. After speaking with the police officer she would go to the hospital.

“Yes, officer. Why are you here?” she asked puzzled.

“Mr. and Mrs. Menchu have asked for protection from you while they remove their things from your property. They say you have abused them and their trust and would like a police to witness their removal of things from your property.”

“My side of the story is: they came here under the pretext that they had lost their home and money that my mother left them to bank fraud. I have learned this morning that instead, they have mishandled their money and have been giving sob stories to my friends for money. I no longer can trust them or what they say.”

Shelly went down the stairs where Maria and Vini were giving a performance of abject fear of her. Sam’s legs were sticking out of the closet, where she was working on something. The two burly men that were there to pack up the Menchu’s belongings were sitting on her couch.

“Get off my couch. Didn’t your mother tell you not to sit on the couch in stained clothes?” Shelly asked impatiently. “Haven’t I seen you somewhere before?” Shelly snapped her fingers. “You’re Ashley Sexton’s driver. This is getting really muddled.”

Shelly pulled out her phone and called the police.

“Hey, I am the police,” the officer said.

“Not until I get a say-so from someone else. Nothing is being touched in this house.” *And then the Haley’s lawyer.*

“You can’t keep our belongings!” Maria said outraged. “You are a paranoid sinful woman.”

“Maria, your religious fervor is suspicious and...” she leaned close to her, “if I hear that you had anything to do with Ken Smith lying in a coma I’ll see that you spend a long time in jail doing your conversion work.”

“Ken Smith is in a coma?” the young police officer asked.

“Someone gave him a drug,” Shelly said.

“We did no such thing! You are being suspicious of everyone. He’s a gay and he was with a gay man. They do drugs upstairs. That’s why we move out!”

“Ken doesn’t do drugs,” Shelly said furiously.

“All right, all right, what’s going on here?” Lawrence Walker demanded. Behind him were three men dressed in business suits that made Shelly nervous. “Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Menchu. You have made this easy.” He turned to one of the men who removed something from his briefcase. “This is for you. In simple layman’s terms, this is a letter from the court saying you are to appear in two weeks. I suggest you hire a lawyer. Your belongings here will be used as evidence as well as what you have in the potted plants and in Mr. Menchu’s studio. If Mr. Kenneth Smith dies, then we’ll add murder.”

Shelly sat on the couch in shock. How could she and her mother have been fooled by these kind people? When everyone had gone, Sam reappeared out of the closet. She sat next to Shelly.

“Let me tell you something,” she said. “People aren’t always bad or always good,” she said. “Those people could have been the nicest neighbors until something tipped them into their dark side.”

“They changed so much,” Shelly said softly.

“When you confront your dark side you’re less likely to fall so deep into the pit, but if you don’t struggle or admit that you’ve stumbled, and get back on track, you just keep doing bad things to cover up...from yourself and those around you. Maria probably thought getting involved in a religion would appease her conscience but apparently, she had to do another thing, poison Ken.” Sam held out a bottle for Shelly to look at. “The bottle may say it’s one thing, but I know what the pill with the word stamped ROCHE on the side is. On this side of the border it’s illegal.”

“Did she give that to Ken?”

“We’re going to have to do a lot of unraveling here to know just who did what to whom. Do you want to take a vacation?”

“Not with Ken in the hospital. No.”

“I suggest you do and let us watch over Ken.”

“Why did they attack Ken instead of me?”

“You mean besides the fact that you have a bodyguard with you all the time?”

“Oh.”

“Didn’t you say that hoochie mama friend of yours is a pilot?”

“Yes. She said Wednesday she’s flying back to Europe.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Are you shipping me off to Europe?”

“If I thought that would keep you safe, yes.” She sighed. “Someone wants you out of the picture and to do that, there is this elaborate shell game going on as a distraction. We need to call a family meeting and get some perspective here. Someone’s not giving me the big picture. Can you make a date with your pilot friend? I want to know what her interest in you is.”

“Why can’t it be renewing old ties?”

“It very well may be, but I want to know for sure. I need to start eliminating names from my list. I don’t want anyone to get an inside track on you unless I want it.”

“Sam, just what is happening here?”

“I just told you. Someone is screwing with you.”

“Why are you stepping in?”

“Because CG Hayes has put me in charge of your security. But you’ll be safe unless they use mortar rockets to shoot at your place. The security at your studio has been increased.”

Chapter 27

Kath was waiting for her by the juke box. Shelly glanced at her watch. She was fifteen minutes early and Kath still beat her. Sam was at the pool table, and dressed in her usual leather uniform.

“Hi,” Shelly said and kissed her.

“Hi, yourself. Did you catch up on your sleep?”

“No. Ken, one of my roommates was poisoned. He’s been in the hospital for a few days.”

“I hope he’ll be alright. How did he get poisoned?”

“We don’t know.”

“I would ask if you want to play pool but the cut throat competition isn’t conducive to a romantic evening for me.”

Shelly’s eyes went to the pool table where Sam was watching a woman play pool.

“Sam?” Shelly asked.

“Sam and the woman she’s playing. Sam was kind enough to challenge me to a game. I played the other woman and got the starting shot, that was all. They’re both too good for just hanging around a bar.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think they’re cops, maybe undercover.”

“Why would they be undercover here? What’s going on here?”

“I don’t know. I only come here when I’m in town.”

“Do you want to go to my place and shoot some pool?”

“What about your full house?”

“Ken’s in the hospital and the others moved out.”

“All right. Let me tell the manager that I don’t need my table.”

Jerry was leaning against Shelly’s Jag.

“Excuse me a moment,” Kath said. She pulled her cell out of her pocket and looked at the caller ID. “This is Kathleen Lee,” she answered. She held up her hand to Shelly and walked away for privacy.

“Jerry, we’re going to my house. Has it been cleared?”

“I’ll check.”

Shelly watched Kath as she hung up from one call and called someone else. Impatiently she hung up and walked to join Shelly.

“How about if I followed you back to your place? I need to make some private business calls on the way,” Kath said.

“No problem.”

By the time they reached the beach house, Kath had finished her calls. She joined Shelly at the gate. She had an overnight bag. “I hope you don’t mind if I’m being presumptuous about staying overnight.”

“No.” Shelly smiled in anticipation of a pleasant night. “That would be nice.”

They went upstairs as soon as they got to the house. Shelly opened the balcony door to see if it was warm enough for them to sit out on the balcony for a while.

Kath dropped her bag near the bed and proceeded to kiss Shelly silly while undressing her. It didn't take long before they were in bed. The thought of playing pool was not in their thoughts.

In the early morning while they showered together Shelly asked her where in Europe she was going.

"Are you planning on meeting me?"

"It could happen," Shelly told her.

"Well, it won't happen this week. My boss asked me to leave last night instead of Wednesday. Since we had plans, I called another pilot, female, to go in my stead."

"I hope you don't get fired for that," Shelly said.

"No, I won't get fired. As long as I have someone to fill in. I haven't had a vacation for over a year. Flying across the ocean is long tedious hours. It's not just because of you," she admitted. "I'm helping my mother get moved from her apartment to assisted living. It's emotionally taxing for us both and I don't want be in Europe so soon after getting her moved. My brother isn't there for her emotionally. He thinks footing the bill is his contribution."

"Maybe he's not able to. Some people can't bear to see someone they love powerless and not as they want to remember them. Is it a nice place?"

"They have a good record but it doesn't mean anything. It's what they do when the public isn't looking," Kath said.

"What about nanny monitors?" Shelly asked.

Kath looked at her surprised. "I hadn't thought of that."

"If they find you put one in her room or elsewhere without telling them, they'll be really pissed at you."

"It would be easier if I wasn't away so much. Which brings me to why I was looking you up originally. I... wanted to ask you a favor, then we got involved again." She paused, "I forgot how nice it was being with you."

"Me too." Shelly marveled at how the revelation that Kath looked her up for a favor and not to reconnect for old time sake didn't upset her. It was the ease she felt with Kath, emotionally and physically, that paved the way to fall so easily into a relationship with Michelle Keloviski. How long had it been? It seemed so long ago and yet the comfort she felt around Kath... was welcomed.

"Do you want a job flying for Hayes Corporation?"

"I wasn't looking for a pilot's job. That's sacrosanct and right now pretty shaky with everyone cutting back. I wanted to ask you if you would give me a letter of introduction to Greg Harrison."

"The art dealer?"

"Yes."

"Are you an artist?"

Kath looked embarrassed. "Of sorts. I wanted an honest opinion and I hear he will give one as well as pointers if he's in a good mood."

"Before I give you the letter, can I see the art work?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Do you want to play some pool?"

“I wouldn’t mind some pool,” Kath said.

“Come on then. I know of a pool table where there will be only one shark.”

Chapter 28

Shelly sat near the head of CG Hayes table. Everyone present was dressed in business suits including herself. Coffee was being sipped as they were all waiting for CG Hayes. Shelly studied the people that were there. Her entire security team, with Sam silent and watching everyone, was dressed in a leather suit, minus rings. Melody, her personal secretary, was talking to Halley, her manager, and Margaret, her accountant. John Parker, was sitting next to his daughter, Halley, carrying on a conversation with Lawrence Walker, the family lawyer. Alan Conley, Halley’s assistant sat on the other side of the table, speaking with one of her bodyguards. She wondered what Alan found so interesting with Jerry.

The doors opened and CG Hayes, Harry and Anthony came in.

“Everyone here?” CG asked as he came striding in. He looked over at Harry who nodded.

He sat down with Anthony sitting on the other side of him. Harry handed him a report that Sam handed to Harry. Shelly could see a family resemblance between Harry and Sam. She recalled Anthony telling her about Harry’s daughter being in charge of breaking up fights between the cousins and the staff’s children.

“This vendetta against you, Shelly, is getting out of hand,” CG said. “What has been suggested is to get you out of town until we can eliminate the source of this vendetta as well as clean up the loose ends. You have a girlfriend that’s a pilot. I’ve hired her to fly you and your support team to Hawai’i. You’ll be staying at a friend of the family’s ranch. Ken is well enough to fly according to his doctor. All those we feel are vulnerable to attacks will be accompanying you. That is everyone at this table.”

Shelly looked around the table again. Her eyes caught Sam’s and there was something she picked up that she thought there was another reason why everyone was going with her.

“Oh, and grandmother is going with you. She likes Hawai’i. It’s her sister’s ranch that you’ll all be staying at. If any of you go anywhere, you know to let Sam know. No one is to go off on their own without Sam knowing where you’re going. Pack your bags and make your arrangements. You’ll be leaving tonight...” he glanced at his watch.

“Midnight is when your flight leaves.”

CG stood up and turned to Anthony. “You’re going too. Jenny needs a challenge in a chess partner. Sam has too much to do without playing games with Jenny.”

Then CG and Harry were gone.

Everyone looked at each other and then began to leave, pulling out cell phones as they left the room.

“He can do that?” Shelly asked Anthony that came to stand next to her.

“You don’t want a vacation?” he asked.

“Ken can use one.”

Halley smiled at her. “Lauren will love visiting Hawai’i. I certainly don’t mind the vacation. I can do what I need to do from the island. Just how good is your pilot friend?”

“She was in the Air Force,” Shelly said. Thinking of spending some time on Hawai’i with Kath was nice.”

“Shall we get you packed?” Sam suggested.

“Just what is going to happen while we’re in Hawai’i?” Shelly asked.

“It’s one of those need-to-know type of things.”

Before midnight Shelly and Ken were chauffeured to the airport. Ken was still weak and seemed depressed most of the time. His motor skills were poor and required hours of daily therapy. His speech was not completely unaffected but he had angrily confronted her on her guilt that she had done this to him. He pointed out that he had more training than her and he slipped up, not her.

He napped on the drive and was allowed to sleep until the plane was ready.

Kath was waiting at the hatch for everyone to board. She smiled and winked at Shelly.

“How’s your mother?” Shelly asked.

“Very well. Ron has stepped up and said he’ll drop by a few times a week. Flashing his badge will get him visits to her during the non-visitor’s hours. I don’t know what changed his attitude but he’s a lot more engaged. Thanks for asking.”

“Where are you staying?”

“At the same place as you. I understand we’re all supposed to stay together.”

Shelly’s face brightened at the thought.

The others began to arrive and were settled. Lauren looked tired but excited at the prospect of flying in a private jet. Ken was settled in the bed that the jet came equipped with. A private nurse settled in the seat next to the room. Ken was already asleep.

Sam sat at the front of the plane. She wasn’t wearing leather. Shelly smiled at her new style.

“Hawai’i is not a leather place,” she said to Shelly.

“I’ve never been there.”

“Then we’ll have to see that you get a tour of the place.”

“Everyone, this is Captain Lee. Prepare for take-off. Buckle your seat belts please. Once we’re up in the air, Cherry will take your orders for any refreshment you may need. It’s about a five-hour flight. We’ll be met with limousines and taken to our destination after your luggage is checked through customs. If you have anything illegal or organic, now’s the time to let Cherry know. Enjoy your flight.”

End